



Akira Karenno

Illustration by **UE**

WORLDEND

WHAT DO YOU
DO AT THE END
OF THE WORLD?

ARE YOU BUSY?
WILL YOU SAVE US?

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A full-page illustration of a young girl with long, flowing red hair, wearing a dark purple dress and a matching wide-brimmed hat with a grey ribbon. She is shown from the chest up, holding a large, round sandwich with both hands and taking a bite. The sandwich has a golden-brown crust, white filling, and red toppings. Her eyes are wide open in a happy expression, and some crumbs are visible near her mouth. The background is a soft-focus landscape with warm, orange and yellow tones, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. There are some green plants and a dark, rocky foreground. The overall style is soft and painterly.

My parents wished they could go home.
The Beasts cried that they wanted to take
back their home.
That's what Carmy told me.

I don't really know what "home" is.
From what I hear, it sounds like a place where someone
is waiting, ready to greet anyone who comes back.
Apparently, they'll say, "Welcome home."
And I hear that's something that makes you happy
and warm...

I don't know home.
But I think I might know it someday if I stay here.
The place Lillia wanted to protect...
The place Chtholly wanted to return to...
I'm searching for somewhere I can call my own,
a place I can go back to one day.

Elia

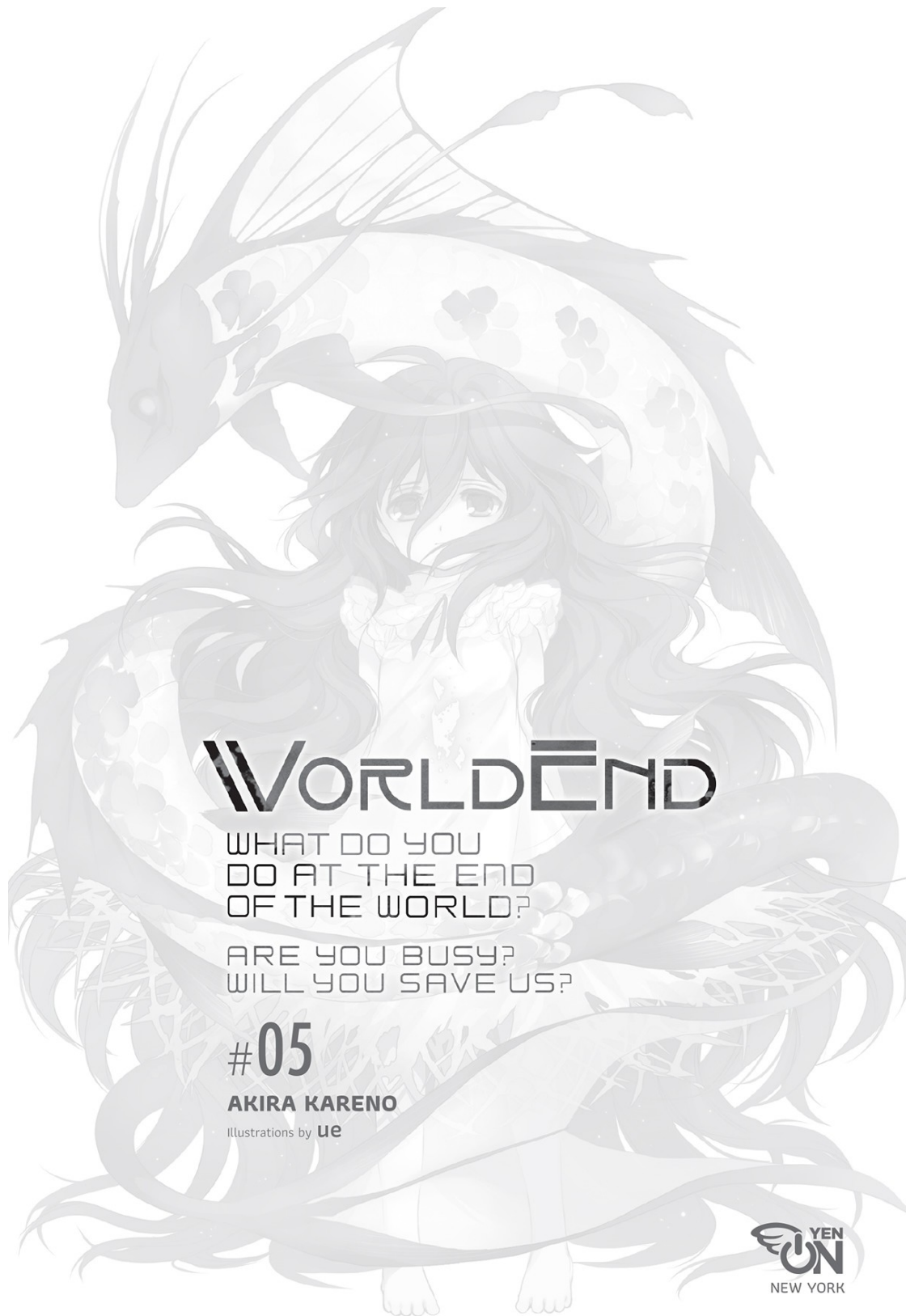


Kaya

Carmine Lake

Nephren

Ebon Candle



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WHAT DO YOU
DO AT THE END
OF THE WORLD?

ARE YOU BUSY?
WILL YOU SAVE US?

#05

AKIRA KARENO

Illustrations by ue

YEN
ON
NEW YORK

Copyright

WORLDEND: WHAT DO YOU DO AT THE END OF THE WORLD? ARE YOU BUSY? WILL YOU SAVE US?

AKIRA KARENO

Translation by Jasmine Bernhardt

Cover art by ue

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SHUMATSU NANI SHITEMASUKA? ISOGASHIIDESUKA?

SUKUTTEMORATTEIIDESUKA? Vol. 5

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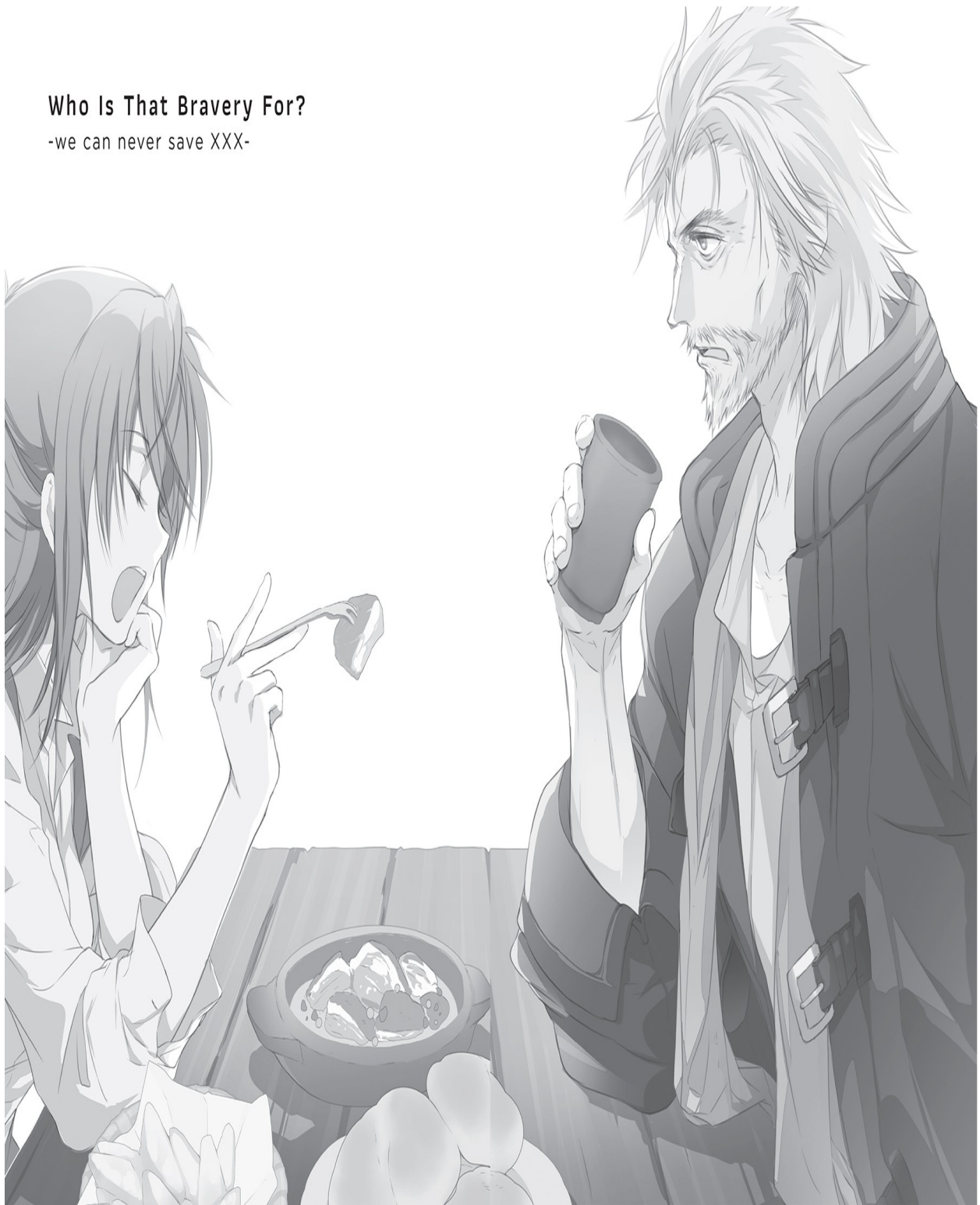
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Who Is That Bravery For?

-we can never save XXX-



Who Is That Bravery For?

-we can never save XXX

The far-too-long journey had eroded their memories.

Their home was so distant and visions of their past so faded. Even the immense passage of time no longer registered as “time.”

Why had they set off on a journey in the first place? Certainly, there must have been a reason, such as war or disaster or the like. They left their home, boarded a ship that crossed between worlds, and began their journey. They visited several worlds but eventually left those behind as well.

Before they even realized it, they’d forgotten the way home.

There was no trace of the path they had taken—only a deep, vast blackness.

When they lost their way, the desire to go home swelled up inside them for the first time. But without anywhere to go, those feelings soon became naught but a delusion.

They merely continued to think of, yearn for, and hope for their home.

They no longer had any memory of home. That was why they read and reread the old records engraved into the Poteau, who served as the ship’s central mechanism, and endlessly pined after the fleeting visions it granted them.

The ending that was death did not exist for them.

After wandering for close to an eternity, they gave up on home. And so they looked to sleep in a sandbox modeled after their home as the stage to spend their next eternity.

That was an end of sorts.

And that was also a beginning.

These were the people who traveled the stars.

Their people would eventually be called...the Visitors.



“—Whoaaaaa.”

After listening to that point of the story, Lillia Asplay let slip a slight gasp.

I thought I was ready for it, but it was still, you know, uncomfortable.

““This is a story we must now tell—that of the true creation of this world!’ ...That just sounds like a crazy headcanon someone made up when

they were twelve. You're old enough, master; shouldn't you stop getting so worked up about this stuff?"

"What are you prattling about, great Legal Brave of our time? I don't tell lies in the first place."

"Yeah, I get that. But it's like, how can I listen to this with a straight face, you know?"

A vague smile crossed her face, and she downed her cup of mead.

They sat in a cheap bar in a corner of the Imperial Capital's sixth district, one that was still brightly lit even in the middle of the night. Her vision was a muddled white, thanks to the grease of the meat and tobacco smoke. It was a place far removed from elegance and cleanliness, but the food was solid. Lillia found renewed confidence in her master's ability to pick a good place to eat.

"Okay. So then, according to your creation myth, all the Visitors put their souls to rest in this...sandbox world they created in the Poteau on their ship, right? I'm just gonna gloss over the sudden supernatural turn things took with the word *soul* for now." She twirled her finger. "So two of those people, or rather, Visitors survived. One of them is Elq Hrqstn, who we're gonna go kill tomorrow, and the other"—with a piece of meat still stuck on her fork, she pointed at the man, her master, who sat across from her—"is the visitor from another world Foreigner Nils."

"Don't point at people with your utensils. Bad manners."

"Okay, but you're not 'people.' You're a god."

"You don't point at gods with your utensils, either. Bad manners."

He was exactly right.

Convinced, Lillia spun her fork around and ate the meat. The juices gushed in her mouth. The charred bits on the outside were delightfully bitter and delicious. She whirled around and yelled toward the kitchen in the back—"This stuff's amazing! Chef, another plate!"

"Also, I ain't the same as Hrqstn and that whole bunch. My home's different, and so's my path. We're two distinctly separate travelers who just happened to drift onto the same planet."

"As a regular ol' human from this world, I don't really see any difference, though."

"I ain't as godlike as Hrqstn and that bunch. Not omniscient, omnipotent, omni-anything. I can't do stuff that's as varied or as powerful as what they're doing. I might have some special otherworldly magic, sure, but I can count the number of times I'll be able to use it on one hand. Two more times, and it'll be time for me to say bye-bye to this world."

"I mean, yeah, it's true that I'm special. I'm superstrong, supersmart, and super good-lookin'. But that's about it—can't manage more than that."

He sure thought highly of himself. *I thought you didn't lie?* she wanted to tease, but she decided not to. Unfortunately, it was true that Lillia's master, this Nils D. Foreigner, was incredibly strong and smart. And it was a little tough to say anything about whether he was very good-looking or not, but...

Lillia supposed that beauty was in the eye of the beholder. She wanted to be tolerant of others' sense of aesthetics.

"That's why I can't offer much help in the battle you're about to take part in. I'll leave the main show to the current Braves, and I'll take care of the boring stuff behind the scenes like the stagehand I'm s'posed to be."

"...All right. I guess that's fine," she murmured as she munched on the raw vegetables that came with their dishes. "And that *boring stuff* of yours has to do with the True World, doesn't it?"

"Pretty much," came Nils's vague response before he tipped his bottle back, emptying it. "And y'know what? I created it at first purely as a secret society to protect humanity. I thought long and hard about that name for two years to give it a clean image, y'see?"

"Wait, what?"

It took two years to do that? That's what you came up with...?

"And after leaving it alone for a measly eighty years, it gets all outta hand like this!"

"Wait, wait, wait—what?"

His tone made it seem like this was on the same level as accidentally letting a pot boil over while he'd been standing in the doorway idly chatting with a guest. But eighty years was way too long to be treated like it was comparable to the time it took to prep dinner. Maybe that was simply a fundamental difference in perception that came from being an ageless, undying Visitor.

"I've totally run out of time while I've been walking around doing jack. We're already counting down to the destruction of mankind. But the org can't really do anything now that it's basically in ruins and divided internally, especially since they've got no choice but to work behind the scenes. Not much I can do, so I got into contact with the top and gave 'em direct orders for different scenarios. And that's about when you got involved in all this...." Nils stopped and narrowed his eyes. "Now, Lillia. Do you believe everything I just said?"

"That's not really the most important question here, is it? You weren't lying, right?"

He shook his head.

"Then, there's two possibilities here: Either you're completely caught up in a cringey delusion or all of it is real... Personally, I want to choose that first option with all my being," Lillia said with a sigh. "But if I did, you'd probably cry. In the most annoying way possible, too."

"You and Willem sound a lot alike when you say it like that..."

"Well, yeah, 'cause we're both just like you, master. You took a couple of innocent boys and girls and turned them into scoundrels. It's time for you to take responsibility."

"You talk big for an uninvited pupil, y'know."

Her master was grumbling about something or other, but Lillia decided she would pretend she didn't hear him.

"Well, either way..." As Nils tossed a clump of meat or fat or something into his mouth, both his gaze and expression tensed sharply. "Lillia. Don't go to the fight tomorrow."

"Don't talk with your mouth full."

"Mm? Oh right." *Gulp.* "Lillia. Don't go to the fight tomorrow."

He said the exact same thing again after swallowing. How dependable.

"Elq Hrqstn is still young. She doesn't have the knowledge to make the decision on her own to attack and destroy humanity. It's probably one of the Poteau...probably Jade Nail's decision to attack."

"How can you tell?"

"Because I've known 'em for as long as humanity's been around."

Eugh, he really says that stuff like it's no big deal.

"Then again, I haven't seen 'em for just as long."

And what he added was eerily unreliable.

"The end of the world's getting close."

He tipped another bottle back. His pace seemed faster than usual. At the same time, she thought she remembered him saying once that since poison didn't affect him, he never got drunk.

"We'll need the corpse of a Visitor to prevent that. Specifically, the soul of one. Then we gotta process it correctly, and we still need the knowledge and skill to attach it to the 'seed' along with an origin spell. If we don't put this all together right away, then it won't be long till humanity destroys this entire world."

"Why?"

"Explaining would take ages, so just accept it as the premise... But as long as you understand the premise, it's easy to get what the Poteau are thinking. It'd be unacceptable for their precious Elq's soul be hurt. That's why they'll crush humanity—"

"Wait a sec," Lillia interrupted. "The situation makes it sound like humanity's at a dead end, though. If we survive, then the world'll be destroyed, and if we die out, then humanity obviously goes extinct, right?"

"Not necessarily. I've got the knowledge and skill for the spell. I also secretly constructed an enchantment lab for processing the soul underneath a town somewhere. All we need now is the soul of a Visitor—"

"Rejected."

She flatly refused him.

"...I'm not finished yet."

"You don't have to, because I get the gist of it. If I can kill Elq, then that's good enough. In that situation, you'd get the church's approval...or maybe some of our comrades are members of the True World—either way, you'd use some kind of connection to collect the soul, cast your spell on it, and that'd be it. According to what you just told me, that should've been the original plan. But if you're going out of your way to tell me to run away from the fight, that means you decided to get your Visitor soul from somewhere else. That's the reason you got so rattled when I dropped by out of the

blue." She swiped Nils's bottle, poured what was left into her own cup, and guzzled it down. "...You're going to use your own soul, aren't you? That probably isn't even your second-best plan, so I doubt there's much chance of success."

No response.

"I won't let you. I'm the current Legal Brave. If anyone's going to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the world, it'll be me—that's my job."

"You—"

"I know. I'll have to go full strength with Seniorious in order to win against a Visitor. I can kill her, no problem, but my chances of coming back are dismal... But, you know..."

She grinned her usual grin.

She pulled it off. She was confident in her act.

"...No doubt I can win if I go full strength. There's nothing as marvelous as a high chance of victory, because that means the life and resolve I pour out won't go to waste."

"You don't have *that* much of a reason to fight."

Nils's expression became stern as he said something Lillia hadn't heard in a long time.

How many years ago was it? Her talentless fellow pupil had heard the very same thing on some battlefield somewhere long ago.

"You might be sad your hometown was destroyed, but there's no anger in you. You don't bear the Brave's duty or the weight of the Carillon because you want it."

"True."

And just as she did back then, she nodded honestly.

However, this time she said something she hadn't before.

"But what can I do? If I quit, Willem will absolutely say he'll go alone. And if we leave him be, he'll actually do it, you know."

"...Huh?"

She took a piece of fried potato from the basket and popped it in her mouth.

As she munched on it, she took all the things she'd noticed before—whether she should have or not—and started lining them up.

"The Legal Braves are strong. All the techniques in the world couldn't touch them; no spell could reach them; no monster stood a chance. And so they'll win any fight they take on. Why is that?"

Nils was silent.

"All the Legal Braves shoulder similar tragedies—taking on the burden of various vows and hopes. Without any of that, they can't be Legal Braves. Once a person gains the background needed for a story, they can start to achieve the kinds of victories that you'd also find in such stories."

"I don't know the rhyme or reason for this. All I'm talking about are the things I've seen for myself during my stint as a Legal Brave. Still, I'm convinced I've reached the right conclusions. Basically—"

Gulp.

“—a Legal Brave’s life is a copy of an *archetypal hero* of days past.”

Nils remained silent.

“Legal Braves don’t live their own lives. I’m just tracing some other life that’s convenient for everyone else, with a few personal changes here and there. Sophistry and far-fetched interpretations are the basics of enchantments, right? Similar things share the same properties. If there’s an enemy who only a courageous, mighty hero can defeat, then someone who’s led the life of a courageous, mighty hero should be able to defeat them. That’s why our lives are so similar to this lofty hero’s. That’s why we wield such strong power, like that lofty hero once did. As long as we fight, we’ll win. And...”

Oh crap. Lillia realized the fix she was in. She felt the corners of her eyes welling up with heat.

I thought I decided I wasn’t going to cry anymore.

She had vowed to herself that she’d hide who she really was until the very end. Instead, she would be an unlikable, unreadable person. And yet, she couldn’t stop herself.

“And just like that courageous, mighty hero...we won’t be able to save the people we really want to save...and we’ll never get to go home to the places we want to. Isn’t that right, Eighteenth Legal Brave Nils Didek Foreigner?”

Nils.

Before her sat a man with a life (?) more complicated and troubled and terrible than her own. And with a pained expression, he looked away.

“It’s not like there are any hard-and-fast rules.”

“You’ve told me that before.” Lillia gave a faint smile. “There might not be any explicit rules, but you’re not denying that something like that exists.”

No response.

“So yeah. I’m glad. I’m glad that what I decided to do wasn’t a waste. Sure, I might not think my anger for my parents and homeland being destroyed or my duty as the Carillon’s chosen are that important. But it’s not like I don’t have a reason to surrender my life to fight, master.”

Now that she no longer felt capable of hiding her tears or tricking her master into thinking she wasn’t crying, Lillia cautiously wiped away a tear with the back of her finger. Then, thinking it funny how unusually feminine that gesture must’ve looked, she smiled a little to herself.

“Willem has a place he wants to go home to. He has so many people he wants to save. Not like me—I have neither. And I’m pretty sure you’re not like that, either, master. That’s why—”

Then Lillia, her voice a little shaky because of her tears, proclaimed proudly:

“—Willem is the only one I will never allow to be a Legal Brave. That’s a good enough reason for me. That’s the reason why I’m a Legal Brave and the reason why I will defeat the Visitors tomorrow.”



In the Mist above the Sky
-uncomplete sonnets-

In the Mist above the Sky

-uncomplete sonnets-

1. The Visitor Elq Hrqstn

She just wanted to become *someone*.

In the beginning, that's all there was.



A single child dozed within a small, sturdy barrier.

The barrier basically encapsulated a small world on its own, completely isolated from the outside. From the second she was born to that very moment, the child had never left the confines of the barrier.

"It's because you Visitors have a presence much too massive, you see. You crush the souls of all those who live in the outside world simply by existing."

So said Ebo, one of the child's family members.

"Your mommies and daddies broke their own souls into fragments in order to live on this land. But we don't want you to follow in their footsteps. You are our last master. We want you to stay with us forever."

So said another one of her family members, Carmy.

"Us three Poteau are here to guide you alone now that most of the Visitors have left this ship. My mistress, Elq Hrqstn—I will put my life and soul on the line to protect you from all outside enemies."

And those were the words of yet another one of her family members, Jay.

Ever since the child—Elq—gained what we call consciousness, these three were always by her side. They tenderly supported her, taught her many things, granted her many wishes.

And yet, there was just one thing:

No matter what, they would never allow her to leave the barrier, where she had been born and grew up in, which meant she never got a chance to see the outside world with her own eyes.

At one point, Jay disappeared.

Then Ebo stopped showing up, too.

When Elq asked where they went, Carmy wouldn't respond.

"They'll come right back once their missions are over."

All she gave was a vague response and looked away.

Miss-shun? What's that?

The foggy thought crossed Elq's mind. But she was much too ignorant to think any more of it and much too young to contemplate her own ignorance.

Eventually, Carmy also went off somewhere, leaving the girl alone in the tiny barrier.

Without any feelings of bewilderment or unease, the girl simply thought about how bored she was in the cramped space.

The hours of boredom felt much longer than she'd thought at first. The child waited idly for her family to return to the barrier, where there was no sun or moon.

She wore out all the toys she had inside.

Just being a little rough with the stuffed animals was enough to push them closer to breaking. She placed them up against the wall to make sure they wouldn't get any worse and stayed away from them. Once Jay came home, he would surely fix them for her. And so she would patiently await their return. Or so she thought.

A loud boom accompanied the destruction of the barrier wall.

What is it? Elq thought. Clearly, it wasn't Ebo and the others. The Poteau were never this noisy when they went through the barrier. Then, who would it be...?

The answer soon appeared before Elq's eyes.

It was a human, probably about sixteen years of age. She held in her hand a peculiar great sword, made up of a collection of metal fragments.

The redheaded girl named Lillia Asplay was a Legal Brave, a type of weapon sent by the Church of Exalted Light in order to kill the Visitor Elq Hrqstn, possessor of an overwhelming power.

"...Rrgh... Gah..."

Lillia was on the brink of death.

Her body was covered in wounds. She was bleeding. Countless gashes lined both her clothes and the skin underneath. All the cuts were deep ones that would've surely been fatal had they been in slightly different locations.

"—*Who are you?*"

Elq sent this simple question to Lillia in the form of a thought.

There was no hostility or malice—only pure and simple doubt. But the overwhelming power contained within it produced a brutal shock wave that reverberated throughout the enclosed barrier, pummeling Lillia's mind itself.

Lillia gave a cry of agony, like a waterfowl as a hunter snapped its neck.

What Ebo had said wasn't an exaggeration of any sort. Smaller fish would be tossed around if they swam close to a large whale as it twisted about. Compared with Elq's overwhelmingly massive soul, Lillia's puny human soul was like a speck of dust.

"Gah... Hurgh—"

Lillia's knees crumpled beneath her. It almost seemed like she would collapse on the spot.

She used the great sword, her Carillon Seniorious, as a cane and somehow kept herself up. Slowly, she staggered. She took one step forward, dragging her feet.

Elq stared blankly. She was still young and didn't understand death. Both how the girl before her was on the verge of dying and how she herself was on the verge of snuffing out this stranger's life were completely beyond the young girl's comprehension.

And because it was beyond her comprehension, it interested her.

What was this standing before her? What was it trying to do? That's what she wondered.

"What...do you need?"

Lillia was struck by another impact.

She stumbled and crashed into the wall.

Her gushing blood stained the wall and the floor, and yet, she still stood up.

Incredible. She didn't quite understand it, but it was incredible. Elq's interest was piqued by this unknown entity she had never seen before. And her excitement granted even greater power to her psychic emanations.

"I'm..."

There was a bubbling noise. The girl paused for a moment to spit out the blood that came from her throat.

"I'm Lillia Asplay. I'm just any old Brave, here to kill you and save the world."

"That sounds like a lot of work."

Lillia shivered as if she was being jolted by lightning. And yet—

"It is."

—she smiled, undaunted, a trail of blood trickling from the corner of her mouth.

Elq didn't understand death or pain or suffering. The only thing she could sense from looking at Lillia was that she stood there with unmatched determination.

Ebo and Jay and Carmy were all such sublime beings in their own ways that they'd never taught her about what she was seeing now.

"Why are you saving the world?"

"...Uhhh..."

Lillia leaned against her great sword, thinking for a moment.

Ah, whatever. I guess I can be honest now, she wordlessly murmured to herself.

"Cause there's someone I love."

Her expression, her smile—they were so gentle and bright.

I want to be like her, Elq thought.

She did it unconsciously.

She looked up to someone without ever meaning to.

"Even I think I'm a real idiot to go running off killing gods just for that. But, y'know, what can I do? He's simpleminded, and he's an idiot. If I don't

rush ahead and do stupid stuff first, then he'll eventually do something stupid himself. Because Willem really is an idiot."

Lillia's consciousness was crumbling after being subjected to repeated shocks. Her eyes were distant as though lost in a daydream, yet she didn't stop pressing forward.

With one step, then another step, Lillia closed the distance between the two until finally, she stood right before Elq.

"Well then, little goddess. Don't take this personally, but it's time to go to sleep."

I hope you at least have good dreams.

She readied her great sword.

Slowly, carefully, she plunged the sword straight into Elq's chest. With the tranquility of stroking a baby's hair, the sword pierced the girl's small body.

Elq blinked, her expression still blank. The Visitors were immortal. They could find death only in the world where they were born, and they had long lost the way back there. So though she could feel the pain, Elq couldn't feel any danger.

Blood began to spill out.

Several fissures appeared along the blade of the great sword. They spread slightly, and a faint light seeped from the cracks. The talent unique to Seniorious, the greatest Carillon of the mortal world, manifested itself. Its power to turn anyone into the dead wouldn't make an exception for an immortal opponent.

The weak light slowly faded then disappeared.

Lillia, now drained of all strength after her heart had completely shattered, closed her eyes.

—*Huh?*

Fwoom—Elq's vision went dark, like a curtain had dropped.

A feeling of weightlessness enveloped her. It felt like she was endlessly falling.

She plunged into the surrounding blackness—far, deep, and heavy. Down, down.

And so the young Visitor drifted into the long sleep that was death.



The Brave succeeded in felling the evil Visitor, and the threat to the world was gone.

Justice would always prevail, and the strong would always protect the weak.

The battle came to an end, tracing the steps of what was expected of common hero stories.

Those who perished before accomplishing anything were unlucky, but their deaths weren't in vain. It was thanks to their sacrifices that the people

could live on. There was meaning behind every death. And so for now, let us rejoice in this joyous happy ending...

He slipped through the blind spots of the peoples' innocent celebrations.

One night, Quasi Brave Navrutri Teigozak carried out the corpse of Visitor Elq Hrqstn, which should've been kept in sealed storage, through a back passage.

Fragments of the Visitors' souls were one of the materials used in creating humanity. They were the keys to saving humanity from destruction. The True World's goal was to make this salvation a reality, and so with great trouble, they extracted the soul from the body Navrutri had fetched and tried to shatter it into thousands of pieces.

But it didn't go well.

There were plenty of reasons why: Nils D. Foreigner, the founder of the True World, went missing during the recent battle; the medical association realized that their various research results could lead to a breakthrough in countering many diseases, so a great number of researchers were diverted to that project at the last moment; they were attacked by righteous adventurers looking to strike down an evil organization that bore a grudge against the Empire.

Various factors interacted with one another in a complicated web of action and reaction, bringing everything to their inevitable conclusion.

The True World needed to smash the Visitor's soul into tiny grains of sand, but they only managed to get halfway there—roughly the size of small pebbles.

And of course, that could never become the key to their salvation.

The certainty of common hero stories was of no use anymore.

There were no prayers to invoke any miracles, no one to reverse the course of events, and no ancient wisdom ready to awaken and solve everything.

Accordingly, the appropriate result was the destruction of humankind.

Left behind in their place were hordes of terrible, seething Beasts, who ran wild, intent on destroying all the living things that inhabited the land.

There were also a small number of fugitives who barely managed to survive that first year, who later sought a land of repose above the sky.

And the final remainders were the fragments of Elq Hrqstn's soul, still in pieces, with nowhere to go.



“—I had another dream above the sky.”

They were in the illusory space created by Chanteur, the First Beast Who Laments for the Moon.

The redheaded girl spoke to the space around her as she held back a long yawn.

"About that faerie, you mean? The little one who dragged the semifer into—?"

A large sky fish, one size bigger than a grown man could hold, slithered out of thin air.

"No. She was killed almost immediately after that. This time, it was about different girls. It was just faeries, and they gathered together in the forest and had a grand time. They couldn't speak words, so they cried, and laughed, and yelled."

"Sounds like a neighborhood nuisance."

"Yeah, it was a bit freaky."

The sky fish nodded several times in agreement.

"...Who were they?"

"Hmm? What sort of question is that?"

"In my dream. I was somewhere I hadn't been in a long time. It was inside that little barrier, when Ebo and Jay were still around."

"Ah, in that old ship of ours."

"I dunno how to describe it. There were all these, like, *stories* collapsing. They were in the holes in the walls, caught in the side of a drawer, hiding in the pictures of a picture book... And when I found them, I learned about the faeries. I learned where they were, what they were doing, what they were thinking, what they were feeling. It was like reading a book—I could read their lives."

"Leave it to a girl your age to have a dream even inside a world that's already like a dream."

The girl didn't quite understand what the fish meant.

"Everything you saw is a part of you, Elq."

"Me?"

"Those damn brutes who shattered your soul didn't have very advanced power or technology. Their work was shoddy, I mean. The sizes of the fragments they created weren't uniform, and though they were broken into pieces, they still have a connection. The faeries you see in your dream are simply shadows of your soul, which was once a part of you. I suppose it's like...hair you cut off a long time ago. The fragments of your soul couldn't stay dead, because your death was only superficial. And you see their lives in the form of dreams through the connection that you have with the pieces of your soul."

"So those dreams were things that really happened outside this barrier?"

"Exactly."

"And those girls who were causing trouble and got punished and made a big fuss and felt weird to me—that all really happened?"

"That's right."

Ohhh. Elq fell silent.

In all honesty, she found it amusing. The enclosed world that Elq herself lived in now, created by the First Beast, was entertaining enough for a naive

little girl. But the fleeting, misty lives the faeries lived provided an entirely different type of stimulation for her.

She enjoyed the lives she saw in her dreams...the fragments of herself that had been separated from her, sources of entertainment she could experience as short, gleeful stories.

Time passed.

There was no meaning to the passage of time in the world of the First Beast. Every day passed as a regular day that could happen anywhere. The typical sense of the next day becoming today and today becoming the previous day as the sun rose and set did not exist here, as every day was always today.

It was only in Elq's dreams that things changed slowly.

Several of the floating islands fell due to the Sixth Beast's attacks as it drifted through the air. A number of the faeries pushed their venenum into overdrive to prevent that. Some people noticed it happening; they captured the faeries, who had been nothing but nuisances deep in the forest before then, and came up with the idea to use them as weapons to protect the island.

"The dreams aren't as fun anymore."

Her dreams had been entertaining because the faeries had been risking their very bodies and souls in pursuit of fun things. But she rarely saw dreams about faeries like that anymore. All she had now were the shadows of faeries treated like tools, killing themselves to let others live.

More time passed.

Every time night fell, Elq savored the stories of the faeries' lives. She watched as the faeries learned how to speak, were given swords, turned into soldiers, and were ultimately treated like disposable weapons.

Around the time that happened, faeries with a firm sense of self and a desire to live started appearing. For some reason, Elq couldn't see these faeries very well at birth, and her dreams only properly connected to their stories after they grew up a certain amount.

Carmy surmised, "Maybe as the same fragments are reborn over and over again, they get closer and closer to an independent existence, and their connection with you weakens."

Which meant that before long, Elq wouldn't be able to see any more stories about the outside world. It was a little sad, since her entertainment was being taken away.

And a little more time passed.

Elq dreamed of one particular faerie.

This one had hair the color of a clear blue sky and eyes the color of the calm seas.

She was a font of great power. And how she should use that power was decided for her in detail: She would take the Carillon Seniorious, rush a particularly large Timere, and they would both perish in battle—the end of a

brief tale prepared just for her. It was the reason she had been born and what she would die for.

Oh, again.

Elq felt gloomy simply watching the opening act. This girl would be the same as all the previous faeries. She knew the girl would never know fun, never wish for happiness, and live a short, disposable life.

Her resignation wasn't misguided. If things stayed the same, that was exactly how the girl would live and die.

There were three turning points.

The faerie indulged a momentary whim to walk around an unfamiliar town, just once.

There was a cat that snatched her precious brooch and ran off with it.

And then, shamefully yet gracefully crushed beneath her rear when she fell from a high place, there was a single, black-haired young man.

"A-are you hurt?! Are you alive?! Are your insides still intact— Oh."

The two ran around the city. They parted. Then reunited.

"—Well then, I'll see you around, Mr. Manager."

The faerie struggled to measure the distance between them. She acknowledged him. Realized how she felt.

"...Like, if I asked you to kiss me, would you?"

She revolted. She hated how her determination to face impending death had been completely dashed.

And yet, she still raised her head, wanting to follow her hopes.

Before she realized it, Elq was engrossed in the story of the life of a girl who was separated from her but also a part of her.

She got a sense that the girl had found something that should've been important but didn't know or understand what it was.

The faerie had someone she loved. She gave up on her own happiness for him. She walked without hesitation into a battle she knew she would not walk away from.

...Oh, I remember now. She reminds me of Lillia.

That was the human Legal Brave who once killed Elq Hrqstn. Ever since she learned about Lillia, Elq admired her way of life, and while wishing she could one day be like her, Elq died.

To be exact, her juvenile wish had technically come true. All the faeries up until that point had never thought about their own happiness and simply threw themselves away one after the other. Having loved ones and personal happiness never played a part because Elq herself didn't really fully grasp them.

Recently, all her dreams were a bit...boring?

That was no joke. It was because she wanted that. She wanted to see the outside world. She wanted to wield a huge sword like Lillia, and she wanted to try sacrificing herself once or twice. All she had done was fulfill her childish desires by literally using up countless lives.

But now, this blue-haired girl...Chtholly Nota Seniorious, was an existence free of this ridiculous charade.

She had someone she held so dear, and she didn't hide it.

She wanted him to be happy, and she even thought she might find happiness for herself.

Though she was frightened, though she was suffering, she headed for a battle from which she might never return.

In dreams, Elq was still a young child who lived in the ruins of the ship. So she felt nothing, since she didn't understand what she did.

But it wasn't like that when she left the dream and woke up in the barrier world.

What an awful farce it all was. She felt nauseous. The Church of Exalted Light was right—Elq Hrqstn was an evil demon. Of course she had to be destroyed.

"There's no need to worry about it, really," Carmy said nonchalantly. "Everyone dying and coming to life is actually a part of you, after all. It might have gotten a little over-the-top at times, but in the end, you're just playing by yourself. You're not causing anyone trouble—I'd actually say that it's your power keeping the islands in the sky safe, right? You're doing something good."

That was wrong. That wasn't it.

Chtholly might be Elq, but Elq wasn't Chtholly. The faeries might still be a part of Elq, but they were all their own people. They all lived with their own desires.

She didn't get desperate about things like they did. She never would. All she could do was pine after those who could and watch from afar.

Time passed.

Chtholly was falling apart in the battle. Elq observed silently.

This dream should've been entertainment, where she could indulge in a short, gleeful story. Experiences she could enjoy that couldn't be found anywhere in her quiet barrier world—that was all. And yet...

"I do have one request. But this is probably my last."

I know.

"I can't really remember the details, but there's someone I want to help. There are feelings I want to express."

I know that, too.

I might not be you, but you are still me.

I've watched how you've fallen for Willie this whole time.

"I understand everything. That is why I'm asking you."

You're right. I thought you'd say that.

I want you to hold your ground; I want you to live on; I want your story to play out a little more—the young Elq in the dream world said none of these things.

Good luck.

That was all she said before pushing her forward.

In the dream, Elq never shed a single tear.

But with a steady gaze, she watched the tale of the blue-haired girl and the black-haired boy come to an end.

2. What Was Once Nephren

Poke, poke, poke.

Something small and soft was poking her cheek.

Just let me sleep a little more, she thought. She didn't really understand why, but she was extremely tired.

"Hey, come on!"

Poke, poke, poke, poke, poke.

When she ignored it, the poking became a fast assault. Her cheek was wobbling all over the place. It didn't hurt, but it was annoying. She rolled over to brush the thing away.

There was a quiet splash.

"Come on already, it's about time for you to get up now."

Shush, go away. Didn't I say that already? She hadn't, but she really was exhausted. She wanted to sleep for as long as possible.

"You'll get sick if you stay like this."

...Oh right...

She first noticed the cold only after it was mentioned. It felt like her whole body was damp with cold water. It wasn't very comfortable. She wanted a warm pillow and blanket.

As those thoughts lazily rolled about her head, Nephren slowly opened her eyes—

DESTROYDESTROYDESTROYDESTROYDESTROYDESTROY

"—Ah!!"

The overwhelming impulse to destroy that suddenly boiled up from within threatened to take over her entire consciousness. She frantically shut her eyes. The storm of destructive urges slowly abated.

What was that?

A perfectly reasonable fear slowly took the place of those unreasonable feelings inside Nephren. There was something she didn't recognize inside her. No—it was more than that. Her whole body had transformed into something she didn't know. She could feel it.

"O-oh my... Things are going quite terribly for you, aren't they?"

She could hear the astonishment in the unidentified person's voice.

It sounded like...the husky tones of a middle-aged woman. At the very least, it wasn't someone she knew.

"...Who are you?"

"We'll cover that later. For now, just open your right eye."

"But—"

"It's all right. Just trust me for now."

Nephren couldn't trust a person she knew nothing about. Still, she didn't sense any malice in the stranger's tone, and it was true that she couldn't stay here shivering, both eyes shut, forever.

Nephren steeled herself for whatever was to come and slowly, cautiously, did as she was told.

Her gradually returning vision revealed a scarlet fish floating in midair.

"...Um..."

"...Are you all right? Can you see?"

"My eyes are broken. It looks like there's a flying fish in front of me."

"*That's normal. Look, can't you see my gorgeous scales?*" The fish twirled around in the air. Her vermilion-silver scales gave off a dewy glimmer. It was just as she said—they really were dreamy and gorgeous.

The incomprehensible impulse wasn't completely gone, but it was much quieter than it had been before. The lingering inclination she felt was still annoying but not a serious problem.

Where am I?

Nephren looked around. There were cliff-like earthen walls surrounding her. When she glanced down, there was a shallow pool of clear water, and she was halfway submerged in it.

When she peered up, there was a large tear in the ceiling far above her. A blue sky peeked through.

"Did I fall from all the way up there?"

"Looks like it."

She shivered slightly.

"It's cold."

"That's why I said you'd get sick if you kept sleeping there... Well, I suppose you'd be fine for the rest of your life."

The odd fish said something equally odd.

"What do you mean?"

"We'll...cover that later. Why don't we search for a path up for now? Staying down here would be depressing, and I personally miss the real sun."

She had a point.

"This area was originally full of holes—it seems the bedrock was weak to begin with. That's also why this big one opened up. If we follow these little paths, I believe we'll eventually find our way up."

Nephren, her left eye still closed shut, kindled her venenum.

Phantasmal, gray wings sprouted from her back.

Her venenum was working without a hitch—in fact, it flowed smoother than usual. Her body hovered off the ground.

"...Hold on—you should have told me right off the bat that you were a flying kid."

"I'm going ahead."

She flapped her wings and headed for the surface.

Why am I still alive? Nephren wondered.

She had suffered fatal wounds in the battle on the *Plantaginesta* and fell to the earth. And in the final seconds before death, her consciousness alone had been entrapped in a strange barrier world, along with Willem's. Then they destroyed that little world and leaped back outside. While that was

happening, she jumped into this odd, black thing that was about to swallow Willem whole, and she even somehow pulled about half of it into herself.

...Right. No matter how she thought about it, the whole experience would have killed a regular faerie three, four times over. And Nephren Ruq Insania was very much a regular faerie, one without any special powers like, say, Chtholly.

She looked back down to check herself over. Though her uniform was in tatters and was barely even recognizable as clothing anymore, she didn't see anything on herself she could call a wound.

It was an uncanny level of restoration that the word *heal* couldn't properly explain. Somehow, in her mind, the crazy idea that someone had prepared a new body for her and moved her consciousness over made more sense.

The wind was calm.

If she kept her eye on the wide blue sky above her, she would find that it was no different from the one she would look up to on Regule Aire.

But when she turned around, a whole surface of gray spread endlessly for as far as she could see.

"...There's nothing here, hmm," the fish murmured with concern after gently fluttering up beside Nephren.

Nephren ignored her and tried to spot the person she was looking for. But she couldn't.

"Willem's not here."

The two of them should have been together this entire time. From the moment they entered the illusory world to the time they destroyed it, Nephren should've been in Willem's arms. Even if there was some kind of impact that sent only her flying off, they shouldn't have gotten this separated.

"I don't see my little partner anywhere, either. She is in no state to be moving around, but she might be wandering about."

Nephren turned and took another look at this odd fish.

She was huge... Not quite big enough to swallow Nephren whole, but the fish could easily strangle and kill her with that massive body.

Fish generally lived in the water. Nephren had once read about things called "sky fish" that swam through the air instead, but that was mostly about tiny fish that swam in groups out of sight. She had never read about any kind of sky fish this big. Not to mention one that could speak.

"—And who are you?"

"Hmm, I suppose it is about time I introduce myself. My name is Carmine Lake. As you can see, I am the Poteau who controls the wind and the rain."

"...Hmm?"

Poteau. She'd read about them in a book once.

They were subordinate deities who once served the Visitors and were, in essence, the creator gods of this world as they were the ones who shaped this world. In short, they were incredible beings.

"Huh."

This fish could call herself whatever she wanted.

And she could say *"it should be obvious"* as much as she wanted.

At the end of the day, the only thing Nephren saw in front of her was a strange-looking, talking sky fish. Although she could tell that the fish wasn't normal, she didn't feel like there was anything particularly divine, either.

"Really, now."

"Really, really."

The fish swirled around merrily in the face of Nephren's unconvinced reply.

"Oh, but don't get the wrong idea here. I haven't always looked like this, you know. See, I once had a body that was much more beautiful and graceful and splendid!"

Okay.

"I lost that body about five hundred years ago. Ever since, I could only preserve my self by freeloading off someone else's soul, which is how I became such a pitiful, illusory being."

"Illusory being"—that wasn't exactly a combination of words she'd heard before, but Nephren got the nuance.

"...Meaning this isn't your real body?"

"Exactly. You're the only one who can see and hear me. Well? Does it feel like you're the chosen one yet?"

"...No."

There wasn't anyone else around them anyway—what point did this unwanted privilege have?

"And why has a god attached herself to me?"

"Yes! That's the main issue here!" the fish abruptly shouted and flailed her fins about. She was so loud. "I originally had a girl who acted as my proper host. We were sealed in that barrier world together for such a long time."

The barrier world. An eternal sandbox constructed by Chanteur—Almaria—that beckoned to all who lived in what was once the city of Gomag.

"But you were the ones who destroyed the barrier world, right? The shock of that cut me off from my host's soul. I lost track of her."

"Huh...?"

"I flew into a panic. I thought, Oh no, I'm going to disappear! But I found you nearby. I knew this was the will of the gods, so I let myself in right away, you see. Well, I suppose the real gods aren't that considerate, though."

Nephren wished the fish would wait for a second.

That world was a prison. And a special type, one that trapped a whole mass of emnetwiht. It wouldn't be strange if this self-proclaimed Poteau had been trapped inside as well. But...

"How long were you in there?"

"Oh, such a long time."

"Without your physical body, you shouldn't have been able to come back to life after being freed from the barrier."

"You're right. That's why I was in such a pinch, you see."

"That's not what I mean. You had a host, didn't you? Is she okay?"

"My, my! Are you worried about a girl you've never seen or met? How kind of you."

That wasn't what Nephren wanted to know, though.

"Or have you noticed that the girl isn't a complete stranger to you?"

That wasn't it, ei— *Wait, what?*

In the slight momentary shock, Nephren opened her left eye slightly.

DESTROYDESTROYDESTROYDESTROYDESTROYDESTROY—

"Agh... Urgh..."

She closed it right back up. In that briefest of moments when both eyes were open, Nephren had been struck by a pain as bad as a massive hammer smashing into her head. It lingered even after shutting her eye.

She crouched down on the sand, weathering the agony.

"I hope you've noticed, at least? One wrong move, and that will take you over."

"...What...do you mean...?"

"Most likely, the spirit of Chanteur has ended up inside you. Possibly through the exact same way that I let myself in... The Beasts have no sense of self, so they're simply a mass of pure desire and impulse, though."

Pure desire. Pure impulse.

That made sense. It certainly felt that way.

"Will I turn into a Beast...? Like the emnetwiht did?"

"Ummm... I don't think so, no. Though you don't strictly have a physical body, your body was always yours to begin with."

"To begin with?"

"By the looks of it, you've become oh so close to being an emnetwiht after multiple reincarnations, but you haven't actually turned into one. Though your spirit may be confused, I don't think you'd be able to get your body back."

...Nephren didn't really understand.



After walking for a little while, they came across strange remains.

There were traces of a camp, the charred remains of firewood within a circle of stones. Beside them were several wooden crates and tin canisters half-buried in sand.

"What inconsiderate tourists. The surface isn't a garbage dump," Carmine Lake murmured idly to herself. Nephren was starting to learn that there was no need to comment on every single thing.

These were probably left over from salvagers who came down to the surface to excavate. They probably got their hands on a surprising amount of treasure and, as a result, discarded a portion of the cargo already on their airship. Or something like that.

She dug up one of the tin canisters closest to her.

It was big enough for her to cradle in one arm. The inside was empty. The scrawled writing on its face was almost completely faded, having been rubbed off by the sand, but she could just barely make out L7 STANDARD PROVISIONS—M.

"Provisions..."

For a moment, she thought these were traces left behind by the *Plantaginesta*. But she immediately corrected herself. That couldn't be right.

Once the ship had left, Chanteur, the First Beast, had appeared here. These tin canisters wouldn't have been able to maintain their shape in the presence of a Beast powerful enough to render everything nearby to dust.

The people who camped here must have come after Willem impaled Chanteur and the barrier world vanished.

"Was I really sleeping for that long underground?"

"About ten days, I'd say."

That ridiculous answer came so readily.

"...I'm not hungry, though."

"That's because you've taken an eternal being inside you. Your body hasn't just been taken over, it's been meddled with."

Another ridiculous answer that came just as readily.

"Let's see... You've become a bit of a Beast now. You'll never age, never die. You're everlasting, imperishable. Is it easier to understand if you think about it that way?"

It was.

It was easier, but she didn't want to understand.

"You mean eternal life?"

"In a way, yes. You're not indestructible, though. There are several ways you can be killed."

"I see."

Was this some kind of satire?

Nephren had been prepared for death, accepted it. Even though there were several times she'd only narrowly avoided it, she was just realizing how much her current situation was the complete opposite of what she'd prepared for.

"...I don't have anywhere to go back to."

Though it was only *a bit*, a Beast was still a Beast. They probably would never let her stay in Regule Aire.

The days she spent in the faerie warehouse—those normal days all seemed so far away in her memory now.

"Are you all right?"

"Mm."

Nephren murmured in response, neither affirming nor denying—since she herself didn't really know which it was—and then pulled a large piece of red fabric from one of the crates buried in the sand.

She wrapped it around her body in place of the tattered guard uniform.



She walked for days across the sand.

Nephren's body, which was now closer to that of a Beast, didn't become tired or feel any fatigue. She could keep on walking for as long as she wanted.

But she didn't feel like it.

Every few hours, she would stop and rest on a nice-looking rock formation.

When night fell, she would lay down and close her eyes. Luckily, her body never forgot the habit of sleeping. Even though she wasn't tired, she could still slumber. She could even still dream.

Surely, one day, these memories of hers would all vanish into the gray sand. But for now, she could still warm her heart with thoughts of her pleasant past.

On one occasion, she came across a cluster of Beasts.

At the top of a gentle, sandy slope, about ten Auroras stood with their ropelike bodies straight and taut, the needles that poked out from them resting against their bodies, bathing in the sunlight.

Nephren drew near, but they didn't respond.

She poked at them, and all they did was writhe a little in irritation, but they ultimately didn't attack her.

Do they think I'm the same as them?

The Beasts, who were as close to immortal as possible, did not need to eat. That's why they didn't prey on one another. They thought of nothing but brutally destroying all non-Beast life, but conversely, in places populated by only Beasts, they were docile to the point of disappointment.

Or maybe this was how the Beasts were originally. Perhaps it was specifically because they so badly yearned for this peace and quiet that they tried to do everything they could to expel all the foreign objects that might ruin it... It was possible that was all they were really trying to do, and they would spend all their time quietly like this if there weren't any outsiders nearby.

She grasped a relatively small Aurora and gently hugged it. It twisted about in protest, but it never stuck out its needles to try and stab her.

"Oh dear," Carmine Lake grumbled.

The two of them didn't mesh that well, but on the empty sands of the surface, they were valuable conversation partners. Carmine Lake tentatively turned to face Nephren and invited her to speak.

"Elq's presence is so far away. And judging by the angle, she's above us."

"...Is that the girl who was your host?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Above us—meaning Regule Aire?"

"Perhaps..."

The sky fish squirmed as she swirled around her.

"Nephren, can you fly that far?"

"...Maybe if I tried."

It was a reckless idea by normal standards. Regule Aire was much too far, much too high up for a living faerie's wings to reach. But Nephren wasn't normal anymore. Now that her body never tired or fatigued, she could fly for days without any sleep or rest.

But she hesitated.

What would it mean for her to approach Regule Aire now that she'd become more like a Beast, of all things? Nephren knew well what the answer was, of course. After all, she was one of many leprechauns, and the sole reason for their existence was to protect Regule Aire from the menace of the Beasts.

She tried to imagine it—she saw Ithea and Rhantolk, their ethereal wings spread, the tips of their dug weapons pointed at Nephren the Beast.

"...I don't want to."

"What if I ask nicely?"

"No. If you want to go, go by yourself."

"I'd have done it long ago if I could! You know I'm dependent on you!" Carmine Lake swirled gracefully around her. "Ohhh, and just when I was relieved that we finally got out of that silly barrier world, things have only gotten sillier! I don't know where Ebon Candle and Jade Nail have gone off to mess around, but they better come get me this instant!"

—Where could Willem be?

Nephren ignored the flailing, self-proclaimed Poteau and began ruminating.

She didn't know about this Elq person or whoever it was, but Willem was definitely somewhere here on the surface.

Of course, she wasn't so optimistic as to think that he was safe and whole. Unlike herself, he was an out-and-out emnetwiht. There was no reason for his sense of self to persist after that black thing, Chanteur's spirit or whatnot, poured into him. It wasn't hard to imagine that both his body and mind had been taken over by the Beast and he had transformed into something completely different.

And yet, still—

I told Almaria I would take care of him.

Nephren wanted to go to him.

If he'd fully transformed into a Beast, then she wanted to snuggle up to that Beast.

That was all Nephren wished for her future on this gray earth.

3. An Undesired Return

There was a bad guy.

The strong guy beat the bad guy.

Bad was gone from the world, and everyone was happy.

It was perfectly fine for stories to start that way.

It was perfectly fine for stories to end that way.

But unfortunately, their story wasn't like that. They were never given a great evil that was the source of all the world's wrongs, nor were they given the power to handily bring down that evil.

So their story started from a place that was a little unorthodox.

And their story would follow their own footsteps as they wandered through the darkness, ending right where they wound up.



Regule Aire, in the sky above Island No. 11.

A single airship flew, hiding among the thunderclouds.

On the outside, it looked like a civilian surface-observation vessel.

The whole outside of the ship's body seemed somewhat shabby. The dustproof plates, which had received multiple runs of Wessex Bordering, had an elegant mottled pattern painted on them; the specs on the left and right propellers didn't match; several windows along the side of the ship had cracked glass, so the shutters inside were sealed tight. Scrawled in paint on the side was the profile of a black cat's face and the words BATO ADVENTURING AGENCY.

But if there was anyone knowledgeable enough nearby, they would have been able to tell that the entire ship's appearance was a little off.

The dustproof plates were practically unscathed, almost brand-new even, and wholly at odds with how dirty the rest of the thing was; it was flying relatively steadily despite how many makeshift parts were attached to it; the shutters visible behind the windows along the side of the ship were far too sturdy-looking given the make of the ship; and most importantly, the steady thundering sound was clearly coming from a large enchanted furnace—definitely not something that suited a small-size civilian airship.

To put it simply, this wasn't the common airship that its appearance would have anyone believe.

The official name of this ship was *Tomorrow Grasper No. 7*.

It was a respectable military airship, belonging to the Elpis Air Defense Force, which was based out of Island No. 13.

The cockpit.

With his large, round eyes, the frogger soldier checked the meters on the wall. All the gauges, from the very right to the very left of the wall, were continuously keeping dull, uninteresting, safe numbers. They were flying smoothly.

On their current course, this airship would arrive before dawn at Island No. 11's first docking district. Then they could hand over the loot they'd just seized on the surface to the Air Defense Force's research technicians.

"—Um, Officer?" The frogger whirled his head around. "I really think we should just throw that cargo away. It might be against our orders, but I believe it's much too dangerous."

"What's that? You got the heebie-jeebies?"

The corner of the lycanthrope officer's mouth lifted in a jeer, revealing a fang.

"No, that's not it. I'm just a little...uncomfortable. Especially those things in freight rooms two and three. I've never heard of a Beast that looks like that." The frogger shivered. "We don't know what unthinkable disaster it might bring."

"There's nothing to be afraid of. We just need to trust in the vice marshal and his plan."

The vice marshal.

The frogger couldn't keep his eyes from swimming the moment that title came up.

"It's not that I'm doubting him or anything. I..."

"The only people insisting those things are dangerous are The Winged Guards. They're scoundrels who're getting money for fighting with these *dangers*. You'd be a fool to take anything they say at face value."

"...What do you mean?"

"The ones publicly claiming that the enemy is more dangerous than they really are can get cash from sponsors. If they keep the fights all to themselves, then outsiders will never find out about their lies. What I'm saying is, they're not as bad as those guys say—The Winged Guard are making them out to be strong foes all for business."

"That can't be!" The frogger's voice shuddered. "One of the islands actually fell, remember?! The house I grew up in was on Island No. 15!"

"Of course. They'll lose on interest and principal if it all their battles look like easy wins. If they hold back and make a few sacrifices every once in a while, then the danger seems that much more convincing. It's show business."

"That's... No, but—"

"As for all those salvagers who went to the surface and got themselves killed, I'd say of course that's what'd happen to inexperienced civilians. Trained soldiers who know real battle, like you and me, have no reason to fear those things any more than we need to."

"Uh—"

"And even if they were truly dangerous, the ones onboard have been rendered completely powerless by our barrier tech. At this point, that whole spiel about these things being impenetrable, untouchable calamities has already been proven to be an outrageous lie."

The frogger fell silent.

The lycanthrope hummed lightly.

"I know very well how anxious you are about Regule Aire's future. We're attempting to bring something forbidden onto Island No. 11, where a great number of people live—I can also tell how insecure it makes you feel. But think about it more simply."

"How...so?"

"We should fight and win our own futures by our own hands...is what the marshal said," the lycanthrope drawled. "Do you think he's wrong?"

"Er... Uh, n-no."

"Indeed—you're correct. That is the absolute truth, and it is righteous. Which means The Winged Guard, who are monopolizing the battles with the Beasts for themselves, cannot possibly have any truth or righteousness."

"That's—"

"We sometimes have to pay sacrifices in order to do what is right. That is a truth we cannot look away from. However, that's the very reason why we must courageously walk down this path. That is the responsibility and pride of those who are members of the Elpis Air Defense Force."

"I..."

Is that really it? the frogger wondered, tilting his head.

That didn't quite feel right to him. But he wasn't exactly sure what was wrong, either. If there was nothing wrong about it, then that had to mean it was right, which would make his hesitation nothing but embarrassing cowardice.

"I—I understand. Please forget my report on the matter."

"I shall. I'm happy to see that the fire of courage has been lit inside you."

The lycanthrope nodded vigorously, satisfied.

Cargo holds one through four on the ship.

Each of them was like its own stronghold.

There was a thin layer of silver, fixed with enchanted properties, painted on the layers of steel plates that made up the walls. Embedded along the floor was an array of wood, minerals, and fragments of bone, laid in concentric circles. Each of these circles imitated the various elements that made up the world—the sun, the earth, life itself... Every single one portrayed the world in a miniaturized fashion.

These formed a simple but strong multiplex barrier.

Barrier spells were a method to maintain walls that cut off a space from the world itself. Once completed, the inside of a barrier became a different world from the outside. When that happened, the rules inside the barrier became slightly different. And the moment those differences manifested, the worlds would no longer be able to interact with each other.

Walls of the world made in this manner would never break, no matter how strong a person. Much like how a wolf painted onto a canvas could never eat its painter, anything that lay within these barriers could never hurt anything on the outside.

There was something crouching down in the center of the multiplex barrier.

And that thing took the form of a featureless, black-haired young man.

“...Rgh, agh...”

It let slip a low, cry-like noise.

Was it aware it had been captured? And did it know it could not easily escape from this place? It was stooped low, biting back its agony in this small, closed-off world.

—And suddenly, there was a heavy impact.

The ship shuddered violently.

“What was that? Did a dragon stone drift into our way?” The lycanthrope furrowed his brow.

“No, that was just a little drifter stone. Sheesh, it was hidden in the thunderclouds, so I didn’t notice it.” Despite the content of his words, there was no tension in the frogger’s voice. His large eyes swirled around, checking the meters. “Well, it’s not a huge problem. This is a military ship, after all—our vessel isn’t so fragile that a little banging like that would sink us. The paint might’ve peeled a bit, but the maintenance crew will do something about that later.”

“I see—that’s a little disappointing. A regular round of drinks isn’t enough to put those guys in a good mood. And accounting will scowl if you bring them all those receipts.”

“I trust you can do something about that... Hmm?”

The frogger’s finger lightly rubbed one of the gauges. There was a slight blur in the inclination meter display, which regularly measured every part of the ship’s interior.

“What is it?” the lycanthrope asked.

“Oh no... This probably means there’s some warping in the ship’s frame. Something that would bankrupt a civilian if they wanted to fix it. We’re the military, so we don’t have to worry about that.”

“Hold on—that is a problem. Now we have to treat the maintenance crew to even more alcohol.”

“Oh well, I trust you can do something ab—”

The frogger lifted his head.

“—Did you hear something?”

“Hmm? What are you talking about?”

“It was like a little *boom* or something.”

His gaze swiveled toward a single door. On the other side was a hallway, and at the end of that hallway was the second cargo hold.

“Are you sure you’re not imagining things?”

“Hmm, you might be right.”

As it so happened, the frogger's judgment was correct.

The true culprit behind the shock that rocked the ship was nothing more than the impact of a stray drifter stone. They hadn't been attacked by an enemy ship hiding within the thunderclouds or infiltrated by a saboteur who was beginning their activities, nor had their "cargo" in the hold started to act out.

His assessment of the damage wasn't wrong, either. The impact had warped one of the dragon bones slightly, deforming the makeup of the entire ship's body. That was the entirety of the damage that had been caused. And of course, that wasn't enough to cause problems with the ship's flight. If this were a civilian ship, then the owners would probably dread the cost of repair and simply leave the ship in storage. That's all the damage amounted to.

His conclusions up to that point were all correct.

However, the crew didn't understand much about the barrier spell set up in their own hold.

Barrier spells this small were unstable given the current level of technology available to the Elpis Defense Force. The framework they were based on was experimental, and there was nothing to guarantee it would work out in practice. The absurd idea of creating a new world inside a world that already existed could stay intact only because of the careful handling of such fine details, so delicate that the slightest mistake was unforgivable.

They'd read all the material. They had all the knowledge. But they didn't understand any of it.

Then again, it wasn't like the outcome would've changed even if they did.

Suddenly, the back third of the military-grade airship *Tomorrow Grasper No. 7* literally disintegrated. In a fraction of a second, what was once part of the ship's hull crumbled into gray sand that was blown away by torrential rains and melted down.

The weight balance was ruined, and the ship nosedived.

With a loud crackling sound, even the safest of places began to be pulled apart by their own weight.

One group of propellers was ripped off its base under the destructive torque. Now, with nowhere for its pressure to go, the enchanted furnace explosively erupted into flames.

The screams and shouting lasted for only a second.

Those, too, were washed away by the rain.

And so, Tomorrow Grasper No. 7 fell.



"—Look, a shooting star!"

It was a stormy night atop Collina di Luce, the sprawling city on the south side of Island No. 11.

Despite the foul weather, several people had gathered and were watching the sky, layered in thick clouds. That was when they saw it.

It was a great, burning ball of fire, one that didn't die down despite the wind and the rain.

"A wish, a wish! Ummm..."

A real shooting star would've never been visible among such dark clouds. But no one watching realized that. The only thing that felt off to them was that it seemed a little brighter than usual, shining a little longer than usual.

One of them, a young ailuranthrope looking up from his bed, unable to sleep, hurriedly spoke his wish:

"May there always be peace on Regule Aire."



There was a thundering noise and a blast of air.

Trees were mowed down, dirt and rocks unearthed.

A great cloud of black smoke rose before getting swallowed up by the dusky, rainy sky.

The burning flames showed no signs of weakening, even under the downpour of rain.

"Urgh...gh, agh..."

A slight distance away from the burning mass that was once an airship, a single man—a thing that looked like a man—lay on the ground.

It was in pain.

The pain wasn't just from the impact of falling from a great height—the intense impulse to destroy bubbling up inside it became a fiery fervor and tormented its body.

"...The...rim..."

It reached out with a shivering arm and dragged itself forward.

He understood that he couldn't stay here. No matter how much his reasoning tried to resist, he couldn't hold out against the screams of his instincts forever.

It wanted to turn everything in this sky, this land of unnatural intruders, back into dust.

Even now, he could feel that heartrending cry of desire slowly gnawing away at his soul. That was why he had to throw this body off the outer rim of this island as quickly as he could.

He didn't know how tough this new body of his was. He might die, of course, falling all the way from the floating islands down to the surface. But he didn't care. The most important thing was that he could never come back to the world in the sky ever again.

He didn't know which way the rim was. The freezing torrent of rain and dark of night enveloped his whole body. None of his senses were working. He simply crawled forward, no thought in mind.

“...Hey.”

As his body weaved underneath the raindrops hitting his back, he heard a man’s voice. He turned to look in that direction, and he saw standing there a large man holding a brightly burning torch—when had he shown up? There was a smaller person on his back.

DESTROY.

Without a second thought, the impulse rose from its chest.

It unconsciously reached out with its right hand and grabbed an olive tree growing nearby. There was a quiet *foom*. And in the next moment, its fist closed without resistance. When it opened its fist, a handful of muddied sand washed away in the rain.

A moment later, the olive tree, with half its trunk washed away, fell over with a mournful creak.

“Stay...away...”

He had been assailed by the desire to destroy anything that came into his field of vision. So he did the least he could do to fight back and covered both his eyes with his left hand.

“Run...! I’m...dangerous...” he screamed in the man’s direction.

“Holy shit. Had no idea it’d actually be you, Willem.”

The man’s voice wasn’t growing more distant—it was getting closer.

He could clearly hear the sound of thick hide boots tromping through the mud.

“I mean, it ain’t like I doubted it was him. Just finding it a little hard to believe. I’m feeling way more like *No freakin’ way!* instead of happy to be reunited with him after five hundred years, y’know?” the man griped to the person on his back, his tone light and casual.

What are you doing? Get the hell out of here! I won’t make it at this rate.

“Stay...back...!”

“...Wait, don’t tell me you’re still in there, Willem?”

He was. But that wouldn’t last for long. He didn’t have any strength left to answer. He hadn’t even recognized the strangeness of the question itself.

“Guess you’re a hairbreadth away. Unusually tenacious as always.”

With a bitter laugh, the speaker came right up to him.

“Yeah, I know.”

That must’ve been directed to the person on his back.

“This ain’t some random nobody; even I can’t just ignore ‘im. But I dunno if *that*’ll be good for him. You know it might cause him more pain than necessary, right?”

There was a short silence, and his attention turned behind him, as though waiting for a response.

“—Yeah, true. You’re absolutely right. I’ll let you have your way this time, Princess.”

The speaker then turned again to face him with a calm expression.

"Be thankful. My powers dried up a long time ago, but there's no relationship that can compare with the one between master and pupil. I'll squeeze out whatever I can for you, just one more time."

The speaker placed the palm of his hand gently on the young man's forehead.

"This'll be my first and last time going up against a Beast. This is special. I'll put *you*, and only you, to sleep with my hand."

...He didn't understand what this man was saying.

But finally, finally, he realized something.

He knew the owner of this voice.

Somewhere a long, long time ago, he'd often spoken to this voice. At one point in his life, he must've looked up to the speaker with admiration. And maybe, in a way, he still did even now.

He must've constantly told himself that he would never grow up to be an adult like him.

"Gaze up at the moon in the infinite darkness of nighttime..."

There was a strange inflection to the man's words, as though he was reciting an old poem.

An odd sensation began to seep from the hand touching his forehead in response to the inflection.

The young man had a gut feeling that something odd was happening. He understood that it might be something dangerous. And yet, his body didn't move.

"The sludge of the night will envelop your eyes..."

His quiet whisper was like a command.

And a moment later, like the thud of a heavy curtain, the young man fell unconscious.

4. The End of the Fight

Time was slowly flowing.

The grass on the side of the roads was turning green, flowers on the trees frantically bloomed as if in competition, and the blowing wind felt just a touch gentler and warmer.

Meanwhile, there were two new faces in the faerie warehouse.

The Winged Guard's search and rescue organization picked one up who was born in the woods of Island No. 26, another by the lake on Island No. 40, and brought them both to the faerie warehouse. Almita and the others, who had been the youngest ones up until that point, were overly excited to have younger ones to look after. "You need to be more responsible now that you're big sisters," Tiat reminded them.

And on a truly felicitous twist of fate—they hadn't lost any old faces.

There had been no Timere attacks at all recently. There was no one to send to the battlefield and no lives to turn to dust.

Chtholly, Nephren, Willem.

In a terrible irony, ever since they'd lost those irreplaceable three, the faerie warehouse had been as peaceful as they always hoped it would be.

"There'sss ssstill no word of a battle forecasst," said a giant, unfriendly lizard from the other side of the communication crystal.

"Sshould there be any Timere attack in the future, it would cssertainly passss through the sssilver eye of the forecasst. It iss but a brief resssspite, but it sseemss there iss time for the warriorss to resst their bladesss."

"...I see."

Nygglatho sighed in relief.

She was always nervous during her regular calls with The Winged Guard—with First Officer Limeskin. There was nothing about him in particular that made her feel that way—it was always because of the topic. Discussing sending the precious children of the faerie warehouse off to battle was something she could never do with a calm presence of mind.

But that was why she was so glad to hear that nothing would be happening for a while.

It was only times like these that she was honestly ever grateful for the primas—the fish-eyed race's tactical precognition, which they prided as being 100 percent precise. Since there was no sign of an impending battle, the possibility of a sudden fight was unthinkable. It was confirmation that this time of calm would continue for a while.

"What a relief." Her feelings were genuine. "This peace has lasted quite a while, hasn't it? It wasn't that long ago that we were sending them off on missions two, three times a month... There's been nothing for a few months now."

"Mm."

Was that response a murmur of assent or something different? The lizardfolk officer made a noise she didn't quite understand and fell silent.

Nygglatho paid no mind to him and continued, letting the happiness pour out of her.

"Eudea and the others are doing so well. They're the ones who just arrived this past month, remember? They seem to be scared to sleep on their own at night, so I've been sleeping together with them every day. Their little sleeping faces are so cute, I just want to gobble them up!"

"Ah, I sssee..."

The murmured voice in response was somehow preoccupied.

And Nygglatho, too, soon picked up on the fact that something was off.

"What's wrong?"

"Well... Thiss isss not eassy to talk about."

He was hesitating. That was unusual.

"Oh, I know what you're talking about. They dispatched a survey team in a big rush because Chanteur vanished, right? Did they find anything?"

"That isss not it. All the reportsss of the sssurvey team have been cut off far above me."

"What?"

Limeskin was a first officer. While Nygglotho wasn't entirely sure of the hierarchy of The Winged Guard, she understood that his was a relatively high rank. It wasn't normal that information was kept from him.

That meant they'd found something on the surface. And the information surrounding their findings would have such an impact that the first officer couldn't know.

"Thiss iss about the battle forecasst."

"Yes."

"I do not mean today or tomorrow, you sssee. There iss not a sssingle foressight of Timere vissiting at all."

She didn't know what that meant. Nygglotho tilted her head slightly.

"Not for at leasst a few yearsss. Perhapsss even forever. That iss how long thiss peacsse is predicted to lassst."

"A few years...or even forever...?"

Not exactly understanding at first, she ruminated over those words for a while in her mind, then—

"Really?!"

Still bursting with joy, she drew closer, double-checking.

Forever was too much to ask for, of course, but as long as she didn't have to force the girls to fight for several years, that was good enough news for her.

She didn't want to feel so pained and sad as she had been before, nor did she want to cause anyone else to feel that way.

"Ahhh! Woooow! Ohhh woooow!"

She couldn't stop making weird noises.

She brought her lightly balled fists together before her chest, desperately suppressing her urge to prance around the room.

"...After recsseiving thiss report, the generalss above usss officssersss had sssplit opinionsss."

Limeskin spoke in a monotone.

She sensed not even a fragment of happiness from either his words or expression.

"At the moment, we musst ssay that we are in the leasst favorable possition imaginable."

"Wait, what? What do you mean?"

"There are a few who ssay that we musst disssband the faerie warehouse."

Nygglotho's jaw dropped to the floor.

"What...does that...?"

"Warriorsss require a battlefield in order to remain warriorsss. Warriorsss without a placsse or enemy to fight can no longer gain the veneration or offeringsss of the people."

He said all this as if it was so simple...

At least, that's how he sounded to Nygglotho.

"No banner can fly oncsse the wind sssstopssss."

"I can't...believe..."

The lizardfolk officer was hard to understand, as usual. But he and Nygglotho had known each other for a while by that point, and she had a grasp on what he meant. She hated that she understood.

Neither The Winged Guard nor the Orlandry Merchants Alliance was a monolithic entity.

There were plenty of members who did not take kindly to the ongoing conflict, which centered around the combination of leprechauns and dug weapons as the deciding weapons.

It wasn't entirely difficult to imagine why.

They were using power that the emnetwiht left behind. The ones literally carrying Regule Aire's fate on their shoulders were featureless. They had to rely on powers of inscrutable makeup and logic. Their fates were in the hands of living ghosts. Pure hatred for monsters that took the form of children. The exorbitant costs to collect dug weapons...

There were plenty of reasons why others hated them. People despised the existence of the leprechauns for their various reasons based on their differing values.

And yet, the reason the girls still ended up wielding the greatest weapons that could be found was simply because it was absolutely necessary. Regule Aire could continue to exist only if buoyed by their fighting and sacrifice.

Without this premise, everything changed.

If Timere was no longer going to attack, then the critics wouldn't stay silent. Everyone would justify their pent-up animosity and take them out on the girls.

That's what Limeskin was inferring.

The "weapons" that were the leprechauns had plenty of problems, the first of which was their instability. Hence why there were plenty of those within the Guard suggesting that this was a good opportunity to let them go, now that the threat of Six was gone. In that case—

"But then...what would happen to the girls? They wouldn't just be set free all of a sudden, would they...?"

Even she knew—that wouldn't happen.

The girls were basically clothed, walking time bombs, after all.

Actually, Nygglotho was the only one putting clothes on them, so without the faerie warehouse, they'd just be naked walking time bombs... But that aside, there was no way the authorities would let them roam freely and allow them to do as they pleased without any management.

"—Ssseveral cssity militiasss sspeak of ssstrengthening their own fangsss againsst the Beassstsss." The reality Limeskin informed her of was unforgiving. "They have long ssstated that they are uneassy leaving the battle with the Beassstsss sssolely in the handsss of The Winged Guard and the leprechaunsss. In their eyesss, thiss isss an opportunity for them to have their own way."

"Then, does that mean they're asking that other forces be able to keep their own leprechauns? Not like now, where The Winged Guard gathers everyone they discover?"

"Yesss. Thosse who agree with that sssentiment are not in the minority, even within The Winged Guard."

Ah, I get it now.

By losing their label as the definitive counter against Timere, the leprechauns' position changed to that of powerful but unstable explosives. They were difficult to use, so of course, there would be people who loathed the thought of needing to maintain them.

And it wasn't entirely odd that there were those who *did* want to have them. Such great power would give peace of mind to anyone who possessed it and bring their neighbors unease. Regule Aire wasn't a monolith. The Elpis Collective in the Winged Empire, the Boreal Woodland in Hydrangea Tea County... There were plenty of islands and cities that wanted to display their military might to the surrounding islands and increase their political influence.

However, that meant—

"You can't be serious. I'm not about to hand over my precious children to anyone else."

Not that they would all necessarily end up anywhere bad, of course. If she pulled back the curtain, a nice life might be waiting for them inside.

And yet, there was no way there could be anyone who'd shower them with more love than Nygglotho. All the time she'd spent here, all the tears she'd shed could attest to that.

She didn't want the girls to be taken away from her.

"Nothing hasss been decssided yet. Do not be ssso hasssty."

"But it's a perfectly reasonable outcome to expect, isn't it?"

"Ssslow down. I have recsseived plenty of ssspiteful remarksss myssself —"

He spoke firmly, but Limeskin continued with something that didn't even need to be said:

"—but do be ready for it."

She suddenly recalled a moment when she was a student.

If memory served her right, it had been when she was in a history lecture. Her armored armando history professor spoke in a muffled voice that was difficult to hear.

He basically said conflict was a constant of nature, the fate of all living things. Peace was unnatural, and *that was why* it was noble.

The unnatural essence of peace meant that it was unattainable, even if it was just there. It was something someone could get for the first time only when they repressed their instincts, constantly pursued reason, and made efforts and sacrifices for it. And peace seemed to shine so beautifully *because* it was something gained for the first time.

It had made sense to her back then.

Peace was noble because it didn't exist in the natural world—it was something they'd painstakingly built up with their own sweat and tears. Now that he mentioned it, one could say that about anything and everything. It wasn't logical that peace was the only exception. She knew that well.

But then, at the end of the lecture that day, the professor tacked on an addendum, as though he'd just remembered:

"Things that are unnatural are ultimately unsustainable. If you try to preserve something unsustainable, you will, of course, lose more than you need to."

"You might think it's a little strange. But peace is much costlier than wartime, especially in places where it's hard to notice at first. And the greatest reason for that is because from time immemorial, even though everyone strives so hard for peace, no one has ever been able to maintain it."

"...Why does it have to be like this...?"

Right after the communications cut out, Nygglatho laid her head down on the desk.

She was the only one in the room. And because she was alone, she began to bawl, her face still buried in her sleeve.

"If they don't have to fight anymore, then that should be good enough. If they can live in peace, then that should be good enough. Why can't it just stay simple like that...?"

If this was a story of fiction, of poetic justice, then once the evil enemy was defeated, once the world got better again, that would be the end. The world would wrap up with a *And they lived happily ever after*, and the future beyond that wouldn't be illustrated.

Reality was a little more complicated than the worlds of fiction.

Time continued to flow, even after the story was over. The happiness they seized would fade and eventually get smashed to pieces. There was nothing that came to an end as beautifully as it began.

"...Willem, you idiot..."

Her sobbing turned into a gripe about someone who wasn't there.

"You said it would be too hard for someone to feel this way alone, didn't you...? You promised that we'd share this pain, didn't you...?"

She knew it was an unsightly grudge to hold. But did she care?

Nygglatho was the only person in this room. There was no one here to feel bad that her complaints were directed at someone who wasn't around to hear them in the first place.

5. Facing the Past

Nygglatho had been acting strange as of late.

She'd often stare blankly out the window, look like she was on the verge of tears, writhe about in worry, then wander off to the other side of the mountain to hunt bears.

No—that simple list of things didn't make it seem like much had changed from her usual routine.

But even if she seemed normal at a glance, there was definitely something off about her, although that something was very hard to put into words.

Well, for now, let's put that aside.

Rhantolk Ytri Historia had a problem.

She baked a pound cake.

She ground coffee beans and kneaded them into the dough, then added brandy for flavor. Next, she added roasted nuts for a satisfying crunch.

Making sweets had always been one of Rhantolk's hobbies. For a change of pace on days without any training scheduled, she'd occasionally borrow a corner of the kitchen to bake. There was one point in time when she was obsessed with the pursuit of the perfect flavor, so she thought she wasn't all too terrible at it.

She felt like she'd done a good job of baking the pound cake this time. This was some of her best work.

She desperately tried to hide her uncontrollable grin.

She arranged the pieces on plates and placed them before the little ones, expecting words of praise.

But every single one of them, without exception, looked doubtful.

"Something's off," Tiat mumbled.

"It tastes fake." Pannibal went straight for where it hurt.

"So bitter!" Collon cried bluntly, pieces of food still stuck to her cheek.

The cake was unanimously unpopular.

"...I've made a mistake."

She understood immediately why she'd failed. The flavor she strove for was different from the flavors the little ones wanted to eat. She'd forgotten to take such a simple thing into account. That was all.

It was such an elementary mistake that she couldn't have made if she'd simply thought about who was going to be eating the cake. Feeling like her lack of skill was being thrust before her, Rhantolk plopped down on the spot.

"Oh, but—but I thought it tasted really good! It tastes so adult!"

Lakhesh abruptly stood from her chair, hurriedly doing her best to cheer her up.

She was so attentive to the little things and such a good kid. Rhantolk wanted to squeeze her tight.

But at the moment, her kindness stung a little.

She joined a ball game.

The game that was "in" now was one that Rhantolk wasn't familiar with, so she first listened to the rules. It was a team game. Each team tried to put the ball in the other's goal. The match was decided when the whole team reached a certain number of points or when every member on the team had scored at least one goal. Interesting.

"Willem taught us how to play. He said it'd help train us for cooperative battle."

She found herself irritated by that additional piece of information, but she didn't show it. She hated how she was being made to think about that second officer even in situations like these, but she put up with it. Instead, she decided to make herself feel better by dominating in the game.

She'd underestimated it.

Rhantolk was a matured faerie, so her basic physical ability was much greater than that of the young ones. She obviously wouldn't do something as childish as play with all her strength, but she had assumed the whole game would be ruined if she didn't hold back the right amount.

In reality, they made her go all-out.

And she still lost.

The reason was clear. One of the victory conditions was having every team member score, and obviously, one person couldn't accomplish that on her own. And creating opportunities for a teammate to score wasn't something that could be done simply by being strong or being fast. More than anything, it required comprehensive skills like teamwork, knowing how to provide support, and a strong grasp of the entire battlefield. And so Rhantolk was no match for the little ones when it came to those areas.

"The theory is that you save people who can score goals on their own for the second half of the match. You use them as a feint."

"It's more important to make your teammates the strikers instead of being the striker."

"Guts and spirit!"

It was hard to tell if the words that showered the defeated soldier were meant to be support or advice. Rhantolk plopped down on the spot.

"I-it's okay, Rhantolk! I know you'll get really good in no time!"

As always, Lakhesh gave her encouragement, adorably pumping her small fist in front of her chest. She really was a good kid.

And again, her kindness made the sulking underdog's heart sting a little.

"Whatcha doin'?" Ithea asked, her head poking out from the rec room window.

"What indeed..." Rhantolk's response was languid as she leaned against the wall.

At the end of the day, she still had her pride as one of the eldest faeries. As someone who'd been raised in this faerie warehouse and served as an example for the littlest kids, she couldn't afford to be beaten by some man who had suddenly shown up out of nowhere.

It was almost like Rhantolk was gearing up to fight someone who wasn't around...

And she'd lost spectacularly.

"Does the officer really bother you? You know you're no match against the illusion of someone who's not here anymore, right?"

"That's not it." Rhantolk huffed and looked away.

"Nya-ha!"

"...What? Did I say something funny?"

"Naaah, just memories. When the officer first came here, Chtholly said something real similar."

Hold on what do you mean by that listen that is not something I can simply ignore because it's absolutely not like I feel the same way about him as Chtholly did because I feel the exact opposite in fact and it's all a coincidence that I had the same reaction so don't you force that association!

"Is that so?"

She wanted to scream those honest feelings of hers, but she held them back and responded quietly and simply.

They could hear Nopht's voice carried on the soft wind as she gleefully played with a ball. *Whoa, nice! C'mon, don't lose now!*

Judging by what they could hear, Nopht had somehow gotten used to the unique ball game without a hitch and was coping well with the little ones. That meant, regardless of age, the only quitter in this game was Rhantolk.

Overcome with an intense sense of defeat, she slid her back down the wall, her rear eventually finding the ground.

She stifled a sigh and changed the subject.

"...By the way, Ithea, I haven't seen you in the reading room recently."

Up until just a few days ago, Ithea Myse Valgulious had spent all her time holed up in the reading room and the material room, concentrating on some kind of research. It felt like the only time Rhantolk ever saw her outside of those two rooms was during meals, bath time, and bedtime.

"Did you find what you wanted to know?"

"Nope. The opposite, actually." Ithea folded her arms on the windowsill, rested her chin on top, and exhaled deeply. "It just made me realize there's only so much I can look up here."

"If you need documents you can stretch as research relating to us or the dug weapons, you could ask Nygglatho and have the Alliance send you some. Is it material in a different field?"

Officially, the faerie warehouse also served as a leprechaun and dug weapon research facility. That was why the accounting division's purse strings would loosen a bit for specialist material, even if the relevance was a bit of a reach.

The research material for the ancient script—the language the emnetwiht of the surface used—that Rhantolk had sunk her teeth into a little before was originally something Nephren, the most omnivorous reader of the whole faerie warehouse, had been wholly interested in for some time.

"Nah, 's not an issue of the subject matter. I'd'a asked for it right away if it was something they could send to me." Ithea pouted. "It's apparently a super-rare old text, and only five copies exist on the island cluster. There's not enough money in the world to buy it, never mind getting permission to see the inside."

"There's...nothing you can do about that, is there?"

"Nope. Nothing I can do."

The two sighed heavily in tandem.

Leprechauns were weapons. They weren't even allowed to leave the faerie warehouse and walk around wherever they pleased. There was no way they had the social credibility to gain access to such a valuable book.

"We're nothing alike, are we?"

"Whatcha mean?"

"Us and Chtholly. She wouldn't have stopped at *'there's nothing I can do about that.'*"

"Yeah, you're right."

Chtholly Nota Seniorious. That certainly was the kind of girl she was.

It wasn't that she was so idiotic that she didn't understand what was and wasn't possible. She fully understood the reasoning, and she accepted it. But she was fatally bad at making her logic agree with her emotions. Her logic and feelings would grow further and further and further apart, until she eventually wound up totally losing her grasp on one of them—or suddenly acting supremely weird.

It didn't seem like a smart way to live at all. But to the others, there were times that they thought it was a fun way to live. It was definitely a way to have fun that no one else could copy.

... Well, it's not like I'd want to copy her anyway.

Rhantolk thought, pretending not to notice the stinging pain in her heart.

"And? What is it you've been researching?"

"Hmm? You wanna know?"

"Yeah, I guess."

Of course she wanted to know.

But until that point, she'd somehow never managed to hear it. Just after Ithea lost her best friends, she had swallowed her tears and silently holed herself up in the material room. Rhantolk had found it too hard to approach her then.

"May I ask?"

"It's not a secret. All I wanted to know is what we are in the first place, that's all."

"...So philosophy."

"Nah, that's not what I mean. I mean that in a more realistic, I guess more physical sense. The officer said that leprechauns themselves existed a long time ago, but they were apparently super different from what we are now."

"How so?"

"He said they were smaller and didn't think about anything."

Rhantolk unconsciously looked toward the field. Little faeries who didn't seem to be thinking about anything were gleefully running around, covered in mud. Plus, Nopht fit right in, rolling around with them.

"Nope, not like that, either." Ithea waved her hand. "They were apparently small enough to sit on the palm of an emnetwiht's hand. And since they were a type of ghost, just a natural phenomenon where a fragment of the soul of the dead made a mistake and accidentally took on a physical form, they weren't much more than illusions that you couldn't touch."

"Huh..."

Faeries were a kind of ghost. Rhantolk knew that.

They were a type of natural phenomenon, born as a result of souls that didn't understand they'd died and wandered aimlessly around the world. She knew that, too.

And so...sure, following that line of logic, it was unnatural for the faeries to have solid bodies and a firm sense of self. It made more sense for them to appear as hazy beings like the past faeries Ithea just mentioned—and probably just like what Willem Kmetsch once talked about.

"The materialization of souls itself apparently isn't that unusual. But the souls of those creatures just weren't big enough, so the most they could do was take the form of a thin mist."

"...That is odd," Rhantolk remarked, her interest piqued. "If that's what faeries are supposed to be, then how should we rationalize our existence?"

"That's exactly it. We're ghosts, but we have all this meat on us... Well, not *that* much meat."

Why did you look at my body when you said that? You're much skinnier than I am and I am still much more substantial compared with the rest of the faeries but that isn't what this is about.

"But when I read through current spirit research reports, they talk about stuff that isn't much different from that. Faeries are souls of the dead, the souls of the dead are spirits, and they're basically supposed to be incorporeal. They're physically unstable and quickly go back to nothingness, 's what they say."

"But...they're not wrong. This faerie warehouse is a gathering place for the legacies of the past that haven't been properly analyzed yet. People would be uncomfortable if it wasn't; we could explode at any time, and that's exactly why we've been shoved off to the outskirts here on Island No. 68."

"That's true. But there are people who've come up with new theories. There's a manuscript written by one of the old managers who used to work here."

One of the old managers? Maybe she knew who it was.

She started to rewind her memory when that thought crossed her mind, but she quickly stopped. The people dispatched here as managers typically did their jobs without ever physically showing up. Of course she'd never remember the face of anyone like that. There was only one face she could think of when hearing the title of faerie warehouse manager—that of the second enchantments officer.

"The paper basically said those creatures have souls that're too small, but if we imagine that there used to be something with a massive soul to begin with, then that could easily explain the existence of the leprechauns or something."

"I'm sorry, what?"

It was a more unreasonable theory than she had expected, and she couldn't help but voice her honest opinion.

"They certainly have to do some serious mental gymnastics for that to make sense. Even though that idea could theoretically explain some inconsistencies, it requires us to throw any sense of reality out the window."

"We're already talking about *souls* and *spirits* and stuff anyway, remember? I dunno if it makes sense to start talking about reality so late in the conversation."

"We're talking about *us*, and we're real, so it should be our priority!"

"Sure, but..." Ithea beamed. "We're ghosts and monsters—the fact we're not real is the main point here."

—*That's...*

"...But if you put it that way, doesn't that mean this conversation is... already over?"

"Not at all. It's just the beginning. After all, our existences are the dreams that some kid has during their death. There's no point looking away from that. And that unknown kid is our precious starting line."

...Sure, that did make some sense somehow.

"And by the way, my— No, well, *Ithea's* past life was a leprechaun, too. She was here almost twenty years ago, died at eighteen swinging the dug weapon Parchem around."

"...What?"

Rhantolk glanced at Ithea in spite of herself.

All she saw was that hard-to-read smile she always wore.

"And that theory I told you about doesn't contradict my memory. If we suppose that the leprechauns themselves are just fragments of a huge soul, then that explains how the requirement for a huge soul is met. That's where the material for new leprechauns comes from."

"Ithea, you..."

"Oh, and please keep this a secret from everyone else. Subjectively, I've lived for a pretty long time, but the only people I've talked about this with are you and Chtholly."

She cackled like she always did.

Maybe she's forgotten how to make the other faces she's supposed to make at times like these... Rhantolk couldn't help the thought that crossed her mind.

"Oh, and obviously, it's too early to come to the conclusion that we were the same leprechauns in all of our past lives just from hearing that. And even if we were reborn as the same race over and over again, it's possible

that if we go back far enough, we'll find that our roots are different, at least. I just wanted to know what the start of it all was."

She couldn't respond, let alone find the right words in the first place.

Rhantolk swallowed a bitter lump of spit.

"But, well, I'm at a dead end, so that's where the conversation'll end. If the second officer were still here, I might've gotten some good advice from 'im. But he's not, so whatever.

"I started all this because I wanted to see if I could find a hint that'd help Chtholly. But I didn't make it in time, so there's really no point in continuing anymore."

Ithea burst into laughter.

Unusually for her, who usually hid all her other emotions behind her smile, her laugh was so lonely, it made anyone watching want to cry.

6. Emergency Surface Survey Team

The enchanted furnace and propellers whirled in a lively manner.

The agitated air current was being blasted every which way.

Far above the sandy surface, an airship flew, enveloped in the thin, silky wisps of the clouds.

The observation crate they'd dropped had reached the sands of the surface without a problem. When they pulled it up to check on it, they couldn't find anything amiss. That meant they were not within the First Beast Chanteur's area of control, which weathered everything that came within range into sand.

"There's no sign of it movin' away... Can't say with complete confidence that Chanteur suddenly breakin' down and dying is a farce," the young boggard muttered doubtfully, scratching his bald head. "Wish it was true, though. If it went off without any notice, then that means it'd probably come back without notice."

"Heh. Intelligent life deals with primitive fear and anxiety with logic and technology."

The gremian, clad in a Guard uniform, wagged his finger and huffed. The first officer rank insignia was embroidered on his shoulder.

"We've already placed explosives far off in all directions around us. They're specially made so that if any of their outer wrappings are damaged by something other than a simple shock, they will promptly create a very loud noise. Is this Chanteur or whatever you call it constantly disintegrating things? If so, then one of those barrels will definitely explode the moment it appears. We just need to leisurely make our way outta here if we hear that noise."

"That sure sounds handy. But what should we do if the enemy comes crawling up from below us?"

The gremian, who'd been standing with his chest puffed out in pride, suddenly stopped.

"...Does the Beast hide under the sand?"

"Uh, I dunno. It's not weird for any of 'em to be up to no good, though. There's just a lot of mysteries around Chanteur especially."

"W-we cannot possibly do anything to counter *that* much. Technology exists to solve problems with known details."

"If you say so, then I don't mind."

The airship began to lower its altitude. The boggard put his goggles back on and turned his attention down to the vast, gray surface.

"It's not like all the problems that come rollin' our way are gonna be polite enough to introduce themselves, y'know. You're the type to start panicking only after the situation gets out of hand, aren't you?"

"Mrgh..."

He probably wanted to say something back. But it was only a few months ago that this very gremian had lost the initiative in a situation just like this one and made a very sorry display of himself. He stayed silent for a moment, likely recalling what had happened.

"Well, that's it, really. Just don't let your guard down. I'm not gonna ask you to perfectly deal with everything that happens from here on out. Just want you to do something, whatever happens."

"...I will do what I can."

He spoke quietly, bitterly.

The boggard, Glick Graycrack, was silently impressed with how much more understanding the gremian had become.

It was just the other day that this first officer was not the type to lend an ear to what other people had to say. Though there was still some resistance in him, Glick's words had somehow made it to his ears, unlike back then. The very fact that he'd taken on the job to lead this expedition to the surface meant that what he'd experienced that day had been a huge turning point for him.

That day—the day a huge swarm of Sixes, Timeres, attacked and sank the airship *Plantaginesta*, they had all lost so many things. So many lives snuffed out, so many injuries sustained. And more than anything, after watching those girls fight, they'd lost the precious asset of ignorance.

They had been protected this entire time. It was thanks to the faeries' battles that they had been able to enjoy peaceful days. Their daily lives were built on the corpses of girls who died every day. A heavy mixture of guilt and powerlessness sat deep in their stomachs.

Once they learned that, they could never unlearn it.

They also became painfully aware of the reason why the leprechauns and dug weapons were treated as classified information even within The Winged Guard. It was obvious that the fewer who felt this way, the better.

Even the ones who were simply being protected felt this way. How had Willem, that powerless emnetwiht who desperately wanted to keep those girls safe, felt about all this...?

"...Weird."

Glick could see several things out of place as he stared hard at the ground.

"Wh-what is it? A Beast?"

"Nah."

He shook his head. Those weren't traces left by a Beast—the opposite, in fact.

In an obscured spot behind a rock, there were small stones arranged in a circle. Charred pieces of wood. Abandoned crates.

"Remains of a camp."

And these remains still retained their obvious shape, despite how strong the wind was on the ground. That meant these weren't very old.

"Looks like someone caught a whiff of Chanteur's disappearance and came down before us. Dunno which salvagers they might've been, but they've got sharp noses."

"What?"

The gremian's beady eyes widened, but his eyesight wasn't suited for such long distances as a boggard's. He strained his eyes as hard as he could toward the ground. However, when he couldn't find anything, he just tilted his head.

"Does that mean they've made a mess of things before we could get to it?"

"We're about to find out."

Glick removed the binoculars that hung around his neck and handed them over. The gremian snatched them away without a word of thanks and leaned over the window, looking down to the ground.

"The K96-M.A.L. Ruins. It sure is a miracle to find an emnetwiht ruin that's still in such good shape, so it's a delicious spot for salvagers...but still." Glick crossed his arms, and since he didn't have eyebrows, he just wrinkled his forehead. "But is it really worth coming down to take a bite so soon after hearing that one Beast *might've* disappeared? ...It's weird."

"Do you mean it's not profitable?"

"Nah, that's not the problem..."

As he was about to deny it, a thought crossed his mind. It sure was strange in that sense, too.

Coming down to the surface was a huge gamble for salvagers. Even simply crossing the barrier that covered the island cluster was costly. The energy costs and rations for a round trip weren't something to be sneezed at. If he was going to hire workers besides his own fellow salvagers, then he'd need to shell out for danger pay. Depending on the contract, there were times they had to leave a solatium with a specialist office ahead of time to send to their employees' families in the worst-case scenario.

Even though it cost so much to go down to the surface, there were no promises of a payout.

No one knew what was down there, but that was exactly why they never knew what they'd find—that was the allure of the surface, and at the same

time, that was the reality of life as a salvager. There were times they'd find riches that dazzled them, but there were also times they didn't find anything worth even a fraction of a cent. The ratio of success leaned very heavily toward the latter.

That's why the salvagers, Glick himself included, were all such laid-back types. They might come across some nice stuff. Something good might happen. Even in the face of such uncertain information, they'd still all willingly get on board to go and find out what was waiting for them. All salvagers had this bad habit. And yet—

"This is way too early to come for a taste. Whoever it was that got here first was gathering way more detailed info on the area, more than the Guard's monitoring collected."

"Hmm?" It didn't look like he understood what Glick was saying.

"But even then, a trip down here costs an obscene amount of money. Y'never know what you're gonna get in the salvager line of work, so it's unnatural to suddenly drop that much money."

"Hmmm?" It didn't sound like the gremian understood any better.

"It's just weird that they'd come here immediately after a Beast disappeared. They don't stand to gain anything from doing that—it's just dangerous. If I had to guess, I'd say they could be doing it to get a head start on other salvagers... Wait, I mean the opposite. They're convinced it's worth the cost and risk—basically, they're absolutely sure it's profitable to get a head start..."

"Hmmmmmm?"

The gremian's little hand firmly smacked the boggard's back. Glick couldn't keep himself from stumbling forward, almost falling out the window.

"Ow, dude!"

"That's because you left me behind to go into your own world. Don't worry about that anymore and start getting ready."

"...For what?"

"To disembark, of course. What can we do just staring down from up here? You know we flew all this way to go to the surface, right?"

—*Yeah. You're absolutely right.*

K96-M.A.L. Ruins—a resting place that once housed a great many emnetwiht. They had business here.

"Oh, but there's something I need to check before we do that. How's it looking, adviser? Does it seem safe for us to land?"

"Hmm... Yeah, sure. I don't see anything that looks like an obvious danger."

"Very well. Tell the chief engineer to close off the second and sixth control wings to prepare for landing and stop the sub-furnace for now, but make sure to be ready to start up again at any moment!" he hollered into the intercom, and the gremian's tiny body dashed down the corridor.

It made Glick feel a little sick being asked for proper advice like that. But he didn't voice how he really felt and swallowed, turning his gaze toward a spot near the horizon.

"...Huh?"

He saw a red speck.

He squinted. He couldn't tell what it was.

He put his eyes up to the binoculars. This time, he could see the little details.

It was a small girl, a red cloth wrapped around her body.

".....Huh?"

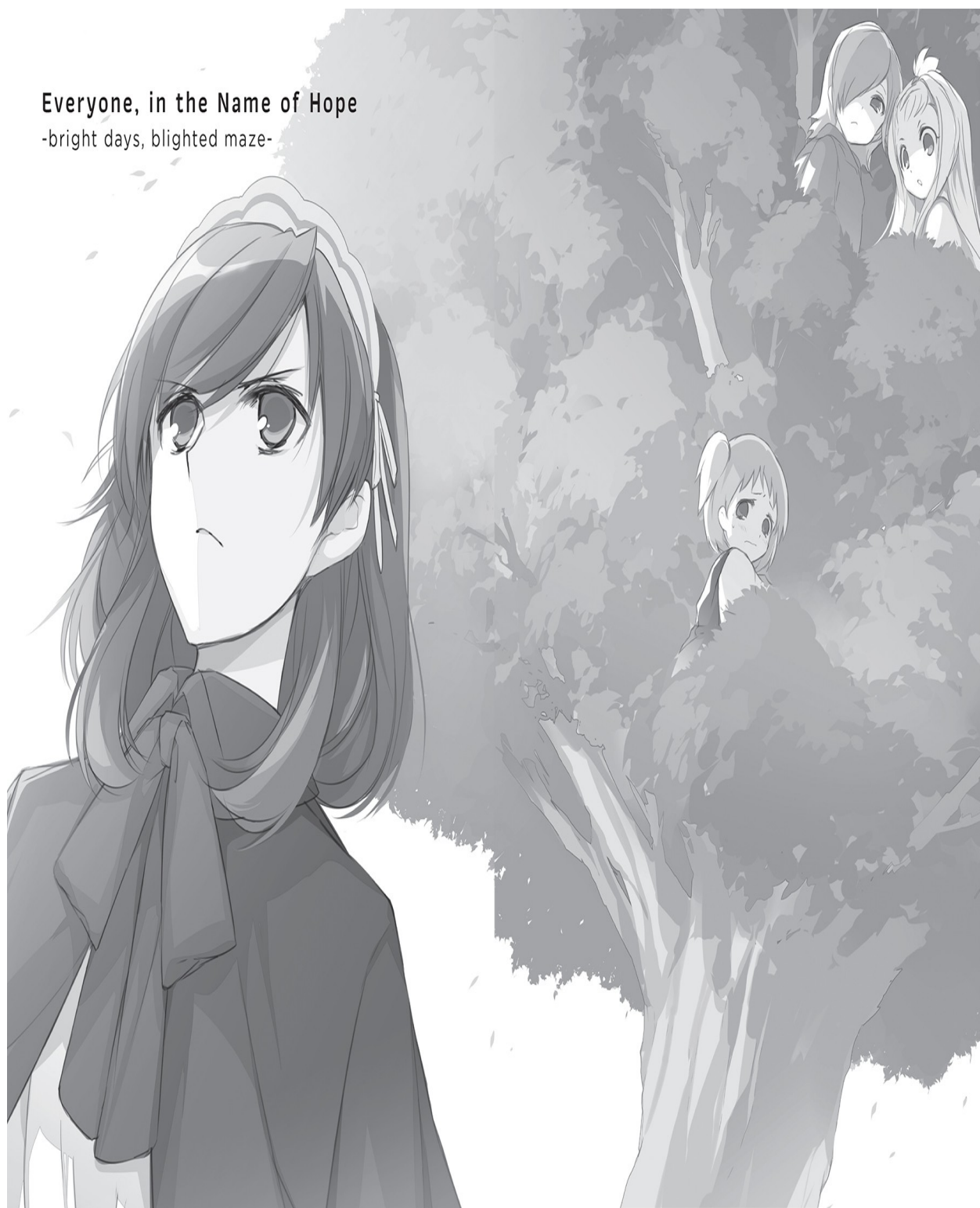
He tilted his head.

He looked up from the binoculars, checked to make sure they weren't broken, then once again confirmed there was a girl walking along the horizon, and then—

" — Th-that's the little gray girlie?!" he exclaimed, neither in anguish nor joy.

Everyone, in the Name of Hope

-bright days, blighted maze-



Everyone, in the Name of Hope

-bright days, blighted maze-

1. Secret Meeting

"Things seem to have taken a turn for the odd."

She heard a strange voice murmuring in her ear, a comment like that of an onlooker.

To Nephren, the speaker of the voice itself was the first thing on the list that indicated things had taken an odd turn.

"..."

She glanced up, and a sky fish with vermilion-silver scales—or rather, a thing that looked like one—swam lazily through the air.

Her body was partially see-through upon closer inspection. She could tell right away she was something like an illusion or ethereal being. The question was why this illusory or ethereal fish was here and why she was speaking so leisurely.

"I'm not exactly the type to sit still, you see. I need to find that Ebon Candle as soon as possible and go search for that missing child."

"I agree."

Nephren couldn't sit still, either.

She didn't know who this Ebon-whatever guy was, but she had to find her own missing adult—a difficult emnetwiht, who always put on a brave face while he pushed people away, one so fragile that he might fall apart at any moment—Willem Kmetsch.

"—Pardon me for sounding so cruel, but you should probably give up hope."

The sky fish floated near the ceiling.

Nephren knew she was the only one who could see and hear this thing, but she looked up to the fish and posed a question anyway.

"What do you mean?"

"Willem's that nice-looking young man with the black hair, isn't he? He's not around anymore. I saw him completely give up on being an emnetwiht and turn back into a Beast with my very own eyes," she said, her big, round fish eyes swirling in their sockets. "He might be all right, but he's different now, not the boy you used to know. You should give up on any silly expectations you might have."

"That's fine." Nephren shook her head. "No matter what Willem's transformed into, that doesn't change what I plan to do. I'm just going to him."

Luckily, she didn't seem to be an enemy to the Beasts after the changes she had gone through. So even if Willem had turned into one, she should be able to stay by his side. Probably. Most likely.

"No matter how deep your love is, that doesn't necessarily mean a miracle will happen, you know?"

She wasn't entirely sure what that meant.

Why did the word *love* come up?

All that was a specialty for girls like Chtholly. Nephren didn't want to get close to him for such optimistic possibilities.

"...Hmm? Did you say something, girlie?"

The young boggard sitting beside her on the sofa turned to look back at her.

"Just talking to myself."

Of course, that wasn't the exact truth. No one besides Nephren could see or hear Carmine Lake. Naturally, their conversation ended up sounding like she was talking to herself.

She had briefly explained this strange hallucinatory—or whatever it might be—sky fish to them. But it was too much work to explain the chats they had together as well.

"Don't worry about it."

"All right. Well...I can really relate to how uneasy you must feel."

The boggard—*Glick was his name?*—didn't even bother to hide his agitation. He scratched at his bald head.

They were aboard a massive airship that belonged to The Winged Guard. This was the guest reception room.

The wallpaper with its magnificent floral pattern; the chandelier strung from the high ceiling above them; the thick, plush curtains hanging over the windows; the overwhelming amount of gold decorations on the furniture—in short, this was a space for someone's nouveau riche sensibilities to be put on display. If Nephren was being perfectly honest, she would have called it extremely uncomfortable.

It was just as Glick said—this wasn't a place to relax.

"How long do we gotta stay locked up in this stupid rich-people room?"

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

The heavy-looking door had slowly opened, and a soldier entered the room.

It was a white-haired rabbitfolk. The insignia of a first officer was embroidered on his shoulder.

"The Winged Guard has found itself in an odd position as of late. All our time is being taken up by worrisome guests."

"Like I give a damn about your odd position," Glick spat with displeasure.

“The Winged Guard does not belong to any one island. Conversely, we can only continue to exist with the support of all the islands. At least, that’s how it is on the outside. There are even some brazen islands trying to demand favors from us.”

“Do I sound like I care? Don’t you have more important things to talk about right now? No?”

“Mm.” The rabbitfolk nodded slightly. “Absolutely. Pardon the delay—allow me to tell you my name. I am Baroni Makish, first officer of The Winged Guard’s military police depa—”

“Okay, but it doesn’t really matter right now who or what you are, does it?” Glick leaned forward. “There’s just one thing I wanna know. Where are you taking us?”



"I don't remember ever asking you to stick around. The only one we need is the dug weapon-compatible faerie Nephren Ruq Insania and only her."

Gulp. When she heard her name, Nephren's eyebrow twitched slightly.

Not only did she not have Insania, there was an odd entity that was inside her now. She wasn't even confident she was Nephren Ruq Insania anymore. When she thought about how someone was still calling her by that name, she felt a little happy.

"Shut up! Quit rambling and just let the kid go!"

Wham! He slammed his hands on a very expensive-looking table.

"This is one of the kids *he* wanted to make sure got back home! He paid for this with his life! She's got a big family back at home! Why can't you understand shit as obvious as this?!"

The boggard was starting to get worked up.

He's a good person, Nephren thought. A little crude, though.

She could tell that he was genuinely thinking of her—a being nothing more than a disposable weapon (that had even already served its purpose)—as a child.

But his consideration was slightly misplaced. The faerie warehouse was kind of like her family, but it was a place where it was normal for someone to not come home. It wasn't like anyone was waiting for her... Well, she wouldn't go as far as to say that. But there wasn't much point in rushing back.

She obviously wasn't going to say that out loud, though.

Nephren stared off with her usual blank expression as all those thoughts crossed her mind.

"—Glick Graycrack." Baroni Makish shook his head, exasperated. "I did a little reading on you. It appears you once belonged to The Winged Guard. You quit after six months but used your connections and funds at the time to start up a salvager business."

"Tch." Glick clicked his tongue.

"I heard you were quite capable. How unfortunate."

"S all in the past. Forgot it already."

"But it is true that you once wore the Guard uniform. Those are the grounds on which I ask that you stop acting so unreasonably. Derailing the conversation will only waste our time."

"That stuff doesn't suit me, and that's why I quit."

Glick threw himself back onto the sofa, an obvious frown on his face.

"...Wait. I have a question." Nephren raised her hand. "Where is Willem anyway? I heard you had a guess as to his whereabouts."

"Oh, pick me, pick me! Ask about Elq, too! Please ask where my little girl might be!" Carmine Lake's voice, audible only to Nephren, clamored by her ear. "We're inside the world that Ebon Candle created, no? Her presence is scattered, so I'm not quite sure where my girl is."

“...And apparently, there should’ve been one more, a little girl nearby.”

“Ah yes, you’re talking about Second Enchantments Officer Willem Kmetsch. I’m not so sure about a little girl... Did that illusion say that to you?”

Nephren nodded.

Baroni Makish murmured quietly, unimpressed.

“We don’t quite have a precise grasp on where he is, but we *do* have a guess. We’ve had a suspect on our list for quite a while now, but you brought back definitive evidence.”

“Huh? We did?”

The rabbitfolk turned to look at Glick, and Glick, his eyes wide, only blinked in response.

“The Elpis Collective. You know who they are, don’t you?”

Nephren nodded. Glick scratched his head.

“They’re the ones on the western half of Island No. 13, right? That country of folks who claim that big rock o’ theirs is a god and worship it. I’ve never been, ’cause their entry taxes are way too high.”

“Yes, them. They are a diverse nation, made up of a vast array of races, but they maintain order by uniting behind a common religion. That is why they are very proud as a people and their policies are aggressive.”

“Yeah, sure. And what about them?”

“The camp remains and ration tins you found on the surface belong to their Air Defense Force.”

“I see where you’re going with this. And I’m asking what they did.”

“Broadly speaking, we have good reason to suspect that a camouflaged airship from the Elpis Air Defense Force transported a number of Beasts from the surface.”

—Silence.

“Huh?”

“Hah?”

Both Nephren and Glick voiced their doubt at the same time.

“Sorry. I don’t think I heard you right. What’d you say?”

“I said, people from Elpis brought Beasts into Regule Aire.”

—More silence.

“Why did they do that?” asked Nephren, the first to come back to her senses. “Bringing in Beasts goes entirely against the island cluster charter. They should know how dangerous they are. And it’s dangerous to just run into one, so how did they ‘bring them in’ in the first place?”

“Simple. They have been angling for the title of defenders of Regule Aire as a card to use in political negotiations with their neighboring islands. That’s the reason they always wanted to stick their neck in the battles with Timere, which The Winged Guard traditionally has sole jurisdiction over.”

“Hah?”

Glick didn’t seem to buy their motives at all.

"It's not that strange, really. Of all the military organizations in the island cluster, The Winged Guard is in a privileged position where we are the ones entrusted with the duty to protect the whole of the islands. The war with the Beasts, as well as all information pertaining to it, and the weapons used in those fights are solely our responsibility. There are more than a handful of people who are not a fan of this setup. The Elpis Air Defense Force is among the more irritable of the bunch."

"...Okay, but then why'd they wanna get involved with those awful things? For the fun of it?"

"That explanation is simple." Baroni Makish held up two fingers and folded each one down as he spoke. "First, it's *because* the Beasts are so awful that they're profitable to deal in. Second, since The Winged Guard has a practical monopoly on all detailed information pertaining to the Beasts to begin with, you could say there are very few who know firsthand how terrifying they really are."

"Seriously? 'S scary they don't get it." Glick gazed up to the ceiling drearily.

"We've received reports from a spy we sent into Elpis territory detailing the development of several weapons to use in battle against the Beasts. Among them was apparently a new kind of barrier tech for capturing Beasts. In short, they currently have a method for bringing Beasts back with them." One of Baroni Makish's ears twitched slightly. "Of course, should word of this get out, they would no doubt be the target of public outcry for violating the charter. As of now, we cannot say why they've decided to go through so much to do that."

"Wait, but that doesn't explain anything, either. What about where Willem is?"

"Try and guess from the information I just gave you. There should be only one conclusion."

For some reason, the Elpis Air Defense Force brought up to the sky a Beast they'd discovered on the surface. And Willem had now turned into a Beast. What did that all mean together?

Oh, now it made sense. The gears slotted into place. There surely was only one conclusion she could come to. Nephren stood from the couch.

"What is it, little lady?"

"I'm going to Island No. 13."

"There's somewhere else you needa go first."

"Move. I'm not asking you to take me anywhere. I'm going on my own."

She activated her venenum and spread her wings.

"Wait, wait, wait! Hold on! Don't do that!" Glick shouted, flustered.

"Elpis is big," Baroni Makish said calmly. "How are you going to find the military facility, which is most likely hidden, considering all the cities that make up that country?"

...By burning them down?

"It is not clear what they wanted to do with the Beast they brought to the sky in the first place. If we grow impatient, that will only delay the resolution. Think of this moment as a part of the process."

"But... Okay."

She folded her wings and sat back down on the sofa.

"The moment we are sure we know where the second officer is, we'll let you know right away, Nephren. That's why I want you to sit tight and wait."

"Okay..."

"We cannot ignore what Elpis is trying to do. We will investigate with all the power we have, and we may obtain information on the second officer through the course of the investigation. At the very least, it should be more effective than having you running around on your own."

"Okay... I get it. Thank you."

"There's no need for thanks," he replied over his shoulder as he whirled around. "You are in a very unique situation right now, Nephren. I was just thinking of the future and came to the conclusion that there is plenty good reason to take the initiative and curry your favor... Now, if you'll excuse me."

There was the heavy sound of boots hitting the ground. And just as he said, the rabbitfolk first officer disappeared behind the door.

"...Was he buttering me up?"

"Beats me. Why don't you ask yourself that?"

"Mm..."

She fell into thought.



She closed her eyes, calmed her nerves, and posed a question to herself:

Please answer yes or no.

Do you want to destroy Regule Aire?

After a moment of thought, the answer she got was *no*.

It was all right. She was all right. She hadn't changed into something that would've picked *yes*.

Sure, she could still feel the empty, directionless impatience stirring in her chest. But it wasn't something that was trying to swallow Nephren herself.

That was very likely because leprechauns were things that mimicked emnetwiht but weren't emnetwiht themselves. This impulse, which turned... or returned emnetwiht back into Beasts, might lurk inside Nephren, who was similar to an emnetwiht, but it couldn't go as far as to change her nature itself.

But it wouldn't be that easy for Willem.

He was a proper emnetwiht. If the same amount of this destructive desire had made its way into him as it had for her, then...

...he probably wouldn't be able to endure it.

"I saw him completely give up on being an emnetwiht and turn back into a Beast with my very own eyes."

It wasn't that she'd believed Carmine Lake. But she couldn't actively doubt her, either.

No matter what Willem had turned into, she would go to him. Half of that was her true intention, and half was just a front.

She wanted him to hold out for just a little longer.

He was so kind, so hardworking.

He was supposed to be different from the sad existences of the faeries, destined from birth to meet such empty ends. That's why—

If nothing else, she wanted just the smallest bit of salvation for him, for the lonely Quasi Brave, who had lived all this time as an emnetwiht.

She so desperately wished that for him.

2. The Looming End

Unusual visitors came to the faerie warehouse.

There was an orc wearing a crisp suit and several brawny semifer who seemed to be his bodyguards.

"...And who might you be?"

"Pardon us. This is who we are."

Nygglotho took the business card from his outstretched hand, glanced at it, and her expression tensed.

"Let's talk outside."

"Oh, will you not invite us in? I heard you're currently the only manager here. I doubt anyone will be listening."

"Let's talk outside," Nygglotho repeated, her voice stiff. She threw an outer coat that hung by the front door over her shoulders. The orc shrugged and made way for her.

"I hope you don't mind walking into town."

"As long as you have a spot picked out."

"We don't have many options out here in the country."

With a composed look, Nygglotho began to walk down the path, leading the way. The men followed her.

"...Suspiiiiicious!" Collon commented from atop a tree growing by the side of the faerie warehouse, her right hand shielding her eyes like a visor as she watched Nygglotho and the men walk away.

"It's the first time I've seen her make a face like that," Pannibal murmured, sitting halfway down the tree, leaning against the trunk.

"They didn't look like important enough people that she has to humble herself like that."

"Hmm. I think this is a little different."

Both Collon and Pannibal tilted their heads in tandem.

"Guys, let's get down... The big kids told us we shouldn't climb the tree 'cause it's too dangerous!"

Far below the two girls, Lakhesh clung to a thick branch and whined with a quivering voice.

"A woman must aim for great heights!" Collon stuck her arm up, pointing straight to the sky. Her pose probably didn't mean much.

"It's important for us faeries to preserve our agility. This counts as intensive training," Pannibal said plainly, stretching their excuse even further.

"That's not the problem... If someone finds us, we're gonna get in trouble..."

"Oh no, we don't want that. We'll just run and leave you behind, then, Lakhesh."

"Yep, you can take up the rear!"

"You guys are meeeaaan..." Lakhesh laughed, her eyes watering.

"Hey!"

They heard Nopht yelling from a second-floor window.

"I said you're not allowed to climb trees as long as you're not afraid of falling! How many times have we said that?!"

"That's why I said this was a bad idea!" Lakhesh was on the verge of tears.

"I climbed the tree to learn fear!" Collon defiantly claimed and puffed out her chest.

Pannibal forced a change of topic, her expression muted. "Nygglatho just left with some visitors."

"...Visitors? Who?"

"I didn't recognize them. She looked super serious. I've never seen her like that before."

"She looked serious?"

Nopht knit her brow and turned to look back inside the room.

"What do you think about that, Rhan?"

"You might be asking me, but I didn't see her face, so my answer is nothing."

"Sure. But doesn't that remind you of something awful?"

"It does."

It had been about seven or eight years ago. Either Collon and the others didn't remember or they didn't know of it. But Nopht and Rhantolk could recall it quite clearly.

There was a violent orc crime syndicate in town at the time.

And that night, they suddenly vanished.

Neither Nopht nor Rhantolk knew exactly what happened. They were taught that children were meant to sleep at night, and they didn't have the courage to disobey. But when they retraced their vague memories, they felt like the howling of beasts was particularly loud that night.

That marked the day when the people who lived on the island suddenly started looking at Nygglatho very differently.

While they had once treated her as a lovely neighbor, everyone started acting like she was a savage predator from that point on.

Nopht and Rhantolk never knew the details of what happened, nor did they want to find out after all this time.

Rhantolk shut the book she had just opened and gave a little sigh.

"As long as history doesn't repeat itself, though."

They went to the usual café in town.

There weren't any other customers around. After bringing over drinks for everyone, the waiter trembled as he went to hide behind the counter.

"Let's get straight to business." The orc leaned forward slightly, smiling affably. "We have come to recruit you, Miss Nygglotho."

"...Is that so?" Nygglotho responded quietly, bringing her tea to her lips.

It was bitter and tasted awful. She endured the urge to vomit, then placed it back onto the table.

"We've taken the liberty of investigating you, and we were very surprised. Though you are young, you are top-quality talent, whether it be in the number of qualifications you've gained at the general academy or your grades while you were a student. And yet, Orlandry is putting these talents to waste by stationing you in such an out-of-the-way spot."

"...Why, thank you."

Now that they mentioned it, they were right. Nygglotho went back over her memories.

She was supposed to follow the career path of an elite.

Her plans had been to take several qualifications that would help her succeed in life and get a job at a large trading company; steadily increase her influence, make lots of money, and meet a wonderful partner.

Nygglotho had dreamed of such a glamorous life and managed to complete it only halfway.

She'd gotten wrapped up in a power struggle within the Orlandry Merchants Alliance. And in the cross fire, she had gotten ousted to an unimportant post in a rural area. She was so shocked by the sudden change in her life, which had been smooth sailing up to that point, that she felt like she'd gone a little off the rails then. *I sure scared the children at the warehouse when that happened...*, she thought, remembering it all with fond nostalgia.

"We are not like that. Though obvious as it may sound, we wish to welcome you with treatment that would suit your abilities."

"Thank you very much. But why me?"

"You're a sharp woman—you must've gotten an idea as to that answer by now. We place exceptionally high value on your ability and experience with handling The Winged Guard's and Orlandry's ultimate weapons, the dangerous leprechauns."

Her hand almost unconsciously moved, but Nygglotho forcefully willed it to stop.

"To be honest, when I saw the barracks themselves just now, I thought... what is Orlandry doing? It was practically identical to a ruined stable you'd

see on a farm. It seems like they aren't giving the leprechauns any budget for management, all while placing their whole destinies on them."

"Those at the top must have their reasons," Nygglotho responded quietly.

Of course, she knew well what those reasons were. That was why she wasn't going to share any details with these men before her.

And these guys seemed to have already investigated everything about and around her anyway. It didn't make sense for her to do any more to let them know.

"And because of those reasons, they will soon surrender their monopoly on the leprechauns. An era where organizations besides The Winged Guard can get their hands on such powerful weapons will come. And a company that can break in good-quality leprechauns will blaze a trail in this era." He spread his arms wide, the excitement in his voice obvious. "We at the Elpis Collective will take Orlandry's place. You have the talent required for our goals, and we are ready to welcome you with the greatest treatment."

"You think far too much of me, but thank you." Nygglotho spoke smoothly, her mouth refraining from smiling. "By the way, if you don't mind my asking, what would you do if I rejected your kind offer?"

"Well, if something like that were to happen—and this is a purely theoretical answer, mind you." The orc stroked his chin. The semifer on either side of him stiffened and savagely stood from their chairs. "These men are very good at making women listen to my requests. But I'm not a big fan of such methods. I ask you not to make any foolish decisions."

"Is that so?"

Nygglotho cast a glance at the semifer's faces.

And for the first time—she smiled at them.

"I'm sorry. I hate people who have unpalatable-looking meat."

"Do it."

The orc's face grew serious in a flash as he gave his order, and one of the semifer moved to obey. He kicked over the table, extended his log-like right arm, and grasped Nygglotho's neck. He clutched her, pulling her up in the air.

The waiter gave a high-pitched scream from behind the counter.

"—Oh, pardon us." The orc turned to face the waiter and shrugged. "I hope you don't mind us making a little mess. We might break the tables and chairs here, but we will compensate you for double their cost."

"My, how generous."

"Big projects will be allocated appropriate budgets. Those who fret over paltry sums will never get a hold of a great deal of money. We are not like Orlan...dry?"

The orc finally realized how calm and composed Nygglotho looked.

That shouldn't be possible.

She should have been feeling the full strength of a semifer's tight grip around her neck, and such a slender featureless shouldn't seem so serene

given her situation. His shocked gaze screamed that she shouldn't be able to breathe, shouldn't be able to make any noise.

"Why are you surprised? I thought you looked me up? You should already know I'm a troll."

"Th-that's... No, but—"

"Perhaps you're not familiar with the troll race? Perhaps you thought there was nothing to fear, since featureless are generally physically weak?"

It was hard to tell if the orc's astounded expression was agreement or denial.

"I thought we were rather famous! We're just a *little* tougher, just a *little* stronger than other people. If you truly want to scout someone, then that's something you need to study beforehand, is it not?"

She smiled brightly and placed her hand on the semifer limb that grasped at her neck.

Her fingers slowly sank into the steely muscles. The semifer cried out in pain.

"...Oh. And you said you'd compensate in double for everything that will be broken, didn't you?"

"Huh? Wait...what?"

"If that's so, then that's a relief to hear."

Nygglatho turned to look at the waiter, shivering behind the counter. He knew very well what sort of race the trolls were. That made things easier for her.

"Could you let the owner know that when the new store is built, I'd be happy to come here to celebrate?"

Confusion surfaced in the orc's eyes. He almost asked what she meant by "*new store*." But he never gave voice to his question because there was no need. The answer was manifesting right before their very eyes.

The troll lightly shook her arm. That one slight movement, which didn't seem to carry much power behind it at all, was enough to toss one of the semifer into the air and send the one standing beside him flying. Several thick wooden tables, which looked quite sturdy, toppled over, easily crumbling like animal crackers.

"What?"

A different semifer gave a ferocious roar and flew at the troll. His perception of the person in front of him changed from a frightened woman to a most evil monstrosity. He knew he wouldn't win with simple strength, so he grabbed her arms and tried to pin her down on the floor. Once he managed to do that, she shouldn't be able to counterattack with simple strength.

"My, how excited you are."

The troll waved her arm again.

The semifer easily flew through the air, his head piercing into the ceiling.

Differences in physique, combat proficiency... All the elements that would typically create great differences in battle were playing no part.

"Oh, ohhh..."

The orc's legs gave way, and he fell onto his rear on the spot.

When she saw his reaction, the troll smiled gently, calmly, bewitchingly.

Screams. Shouts. Cracking. Smashing. And for good measure, another scream.

And that's how a café disappeared from the face of Island No. 68 that day.



"I heard the report."

The face of the lizardfolk on the other side of the communication crystal was hard to read, as usual, but he seemed somewhat vexed.

"It ssseemsss you went overboard."

"It was their fault," she responded calmly. "They were treating my precious children as *things* right in front of me. They deserved capital punishment. Oh... Also, a number of grown men attacked me and tried to use force to get a woman to do what they want. That is inexcusable behavior if you think about it, no?"

"It isss quite like you to follow sssuch a procssedure." Limeskin hummed. "But more importantly, there iss sssomething I musst tell you, ass well ass sssomething I musst assk of you."

"...What do you mean?" She furrowed her brow. "I'll listen if you have something to say, and if there's something I can do, I'll do it."

"There iss a bug."

A bug.

...Was someone listening in on their conversation over the crystal? Who? How?

The crystal they were using now was an important communication tool between the Guard and the Merchants Alliance. She doubted someone outside their organizations could so easily listen in on them.

Was something like that really possible? Assuming it was, then how did they do it? There was (probably) no panic in Limeskin's expression. That meant their being eavesdropped on wasn't an emergency...

She realized what it was.

Oh right, that's what he meant.

Their connection wasn't something that just anyone could easily listen in on. In that case, the answer was simple—they were being eavesdropped on by somewhere who wasn't from the outside.

The bug was close to Limeskin. It was in The Winged Guard.

The Guard wasn't a monolith. The members' opinions were split, especially when it came to dealing with the leprechauns. Even though they belonged to the same organization, there was opposition in the ranks.

"Is that something you can just leave alone?"

"I do not know. That iss not a judgment I can make. That iss why I want to assk you sssomething."

"I understand." She gulped. "Say anything you want, even if it's roundabout and hard to understand."

Even though she'd known Limeskin for a long time, she still struggled to understand his difficult way of saying things. If they used it well, they might be able to outsmart their eavesdropper...is what she was thinking when she said that, but—

"Come to Collina di Luce."

"What?"

It was now, of all times, that he talked business in an absurdly simple manner.

"The city of Collina di Luce? ...What? You want me? To go there?"

"Yesss. And bring along with you all the mature faerie sssoldiersss who are battle-ready."

"W-wait a second. Them too? On what pretense?"

"...I have no idea. I leave that plan to you."

"Hold on!"

The faeries were weapons owned by the Guard and Orlandry. Even if there was the possibility that the situation might change in the near future, they still had to respect the current arrangement. The mature faeries, especially, served as critical firepower in the defense of Regule Aire. Nygglotho wasn't allowed to take them wherever she pleased. She needed a justifiable reason and preferably a set of orders for a military operation.

Nygglotho was a member of the Orlandry Merchants Alliance. And if any organization members could just take Ithea and the others out of the warehouse whenever they wanted, that would give part of The Winged Guard ammunition to denounce the faerie warehouse. And on a long-term basis, that would only shorten the life of the warehouse, and—

"I ssshall be waiting for you there."

...Oh right, that's what he meant.

And of course, Limeskin also knew that on a long-term basis, that would be a poor move on their part. Not only that, he was also leaving the entire plan to her and simply asked that she show up. That meant he not only knew how unreasonable it was but, at the same time, also made the decision that it was necessary to make that request.

Was the situation they were facing really that dire? She didn't want to believe there was no reason to think about the long-term anymore.

"All right. I'll figure something out."

Even if she wanted to ask the details of the situation, she couldn't right now. She decided to ask about all the things he was probably hiding when they met in person.

Before ending the call, she voiced one slight complaint. "...And even though we don't have to talk about war anymore, it doesn't seem like we can ever talk about nice things, can we?"

"Once the enemy before us has disappeared, everyone begins to search for the next enemy among their neighbors..."

And surprisingly, she got a reply that sounded like a complaint.

"Perhaps everyone has recognized that peace is the most terrifying of disasters."



Well then, I've been handed a rather difficult problem.

She'd been told to bring all mature faerie soldiers who wielded swords... which meant:

Ithea Myse Valgulous,
Rhantolk Ytri Historia,
And Tiat Siba Ignareo.
Those three.

Nopht was a mature faerie, but since they lost Desperatio, the dug weapon she was compatible with, she lacked a sword of her own. Nygglotho felt nervous leaving the little kids alone, so maybe it was a good thing to put Nopht, one of the oldest, in charge of things while she was gone... Nopht wasn't exactly the most attentive of the bunch, which made Nygglotho a little hesitant to count her among the older girls, but she was going to actively ignore that part.

And so what she had to think of was a pretext.

If she was going to take all the fighting power that was supposed to protect Regule Aire and fly out to Collina di Luce, she needed a really good reason for it, no matter how far-fetched.

"Hmm..."

She walked down the hallway in thought.

What about shopping, for example? No, that wasn't good enough. What could they possibly have to buy that they'd need to fly all the way from Island No. 68 to No. 11? If they were told to keep their shopping in the neighborhood, she wouldn't have a way to refute that.

Then, what about sightseeing? Collina di Luce was the oldest city on Regule Aire, and there were plenty of famous spots that one could find nowhere else. There was no way they could do any of that in their neck of the woods, but... Right, such a leisurely reason wouldn't be persuasive in the first place. Nygglotho knew that.

In that case, what other reasons were there? What about proposing a mock battle with the forces stationed in the city? No, she could use that excuse only after they accepted the proposal. Then, she could force the start of a mock battle by asking for approval after the fact. No, that would just start a war.

She couldn't think of any ideas. *Oh dear. What should I do?*

As those thoughts ran through her mind, she dropped by the kitchen and made herself a cup of tea. It ended up tasting rather bitter, since she made it while she was distracted, but, well, it was much better than what she had earlier that day. She tilted the cup, ready to take a sip and start calming down—

"U-um, can I talk to you now?"

A little faerie with peach-colored hair—Lakhesh—stood beside her.

"...Er, I'm sorry, I'm busy thinking right now."

"Oh... Okay, I'm sorry..." Her shoulders drooped. "I'll come back later."

"Ohhhhh no, wait. Sorry, I got my priorities backward." The guilt that bubbled up inside Nygglotho forced the words to rush out of her mouth. "There's no point if you aren't my top priority... What's wrong?"

"Oh, um...are you sure?"

"Of course. What is it this time? Did Collon break a window again?"

"No, that's not it. It's about me this time."

"My, my."

This was unusual.

The young faeries were essentially pure and innocent, or maybe just brazen—but either way, they were all energetic. Lakhesh, though, was one of the very few exceptions. She always acted as a control for the other faeries, who tended to go wild. Regardless of whether or not she actually kept them under control, she still tried.

Up until now, she was never the kind of girl to report anything about herself.

"What is it? Did you break a flowerpot?"

"No, um... It's nothing like that." She faltered and fell silent for a moment but then seemed to gather herself and continued. "I had a dream."

".....Hmm?"

For a moment, Nygglotho didn't understand.

"I had it while I was taking a nap just now. I dreamed I was in a dark place, but there were, like, all these lights surrounding me. Those lights were like stories I could read, like books, and... Ohhh, I can't really explain it..."

Well. That would be...

"Is it the 'special dream'?"

"Yes, it is!" Lakhesh grew excited. "I'm sure of it. I knew it was right away when I woke up. I knew it!"

The younger girls would all reach a point where they would have a dream.

They would be in a place they had never been, looking at scenery they had never seen, talking to people they had never met. That kind of dream. They were in an absolute fantasy world, but it had such a sense of realism about it—

And then, the moment they awoke, they *knew*, without rhyme or reason—that dream was special. They knew they had connected with something important.

That signaled the end of their youth. It meant all the preparations for them to become matured faeries were finished.

“.....”

A young faerie had seen a special dream.

Then, what was the next thing that had to be done? Physical adjustment. The handlers had to record her physical data as they tweaked her physique so that she could start work as an independent adult faerie soldier.

“Tha...”

“Tha?”

And to make that happen, Nygglotho had to take the child to the general clinic in Collina di Luce.

That was her given duty as the one who managed the faerie warehouse.

It was her duty, and that meant it was a perfectly justifiable excuse.

“Thaaat’s it!”

Overcome with joy, Nygglotho scooped Lakhesh into her arms.

“Eeeep?!”

If she hugged Lakhesh with all her might, of course, the girl’s upper and lower halves would probably have had to bid each other tearful good-byes. So she carefully, softly embraced her, like a marshmallow, all while maintaining a firm enough grip to keep her prey from escaping. It was the secret to hugging that Nygglotho had worked so hard to master.

“Ohhhh, Lakhesh, you are such a considerate girl! I love you so much!”

“What? What? What?”

Lakhesh was bewildered.

3. The Man without a Past

There was this feeling as if he were rising from heavy, sticky mud.

Once he sat up, the black that covered his skin slowly slipped away. But that didn’t mean it was gone. It pooled at his feet and didn’t leave him.

—That was how he felt the moment he woke up.

“Urgh...”

Slowly, his eyes opened.

A single ray of light pierced his pitch-black world. It steadily grew and soon became the face of a little girl, examining him up close.

“...Uh?”

“Oh!”

Their eyes met.

He saw her big, crimson eyes blink once.

He watched her serious expression slowly transform into a beaming, ear-to-ear smile.

“Wi...”

Wi?

“Willie’s awake!”

“...Huh?”

His brain wasn't working properly. Incomprehensible, distracting thoughts swirled around inside his skull, but he couldn't remember anything even if he tried. What was “*Willie*”? It sounded vaguely familiar yet somewhat uncomfortable.

“Nils, come here! Willie's awake!” she hollered as she spun around and hopped in place. Her absurdly long, red hair swayed softly back and forth.

“Yeah, yeah, I hear ya. Pipe down—you'll bother the neighbors.”

A weary-looking man entered the room, lazily scratching the back of his head.

Right, the room. He looked around again and saw that it was a well-maintained room, likely one in an inn.

The furniture, including the bed he was lying on, wasn't particularly fancy, but it wasn't shabby, either. The going rate for this room was probably around thirty bradal a night—and he could tell at a glance it was being cleaned, so it might be a little more than that.

But now wasn't the time for idle musings.

There was a dull pain deep in his mind. His thoughts kept running in circles. Things that hardly mattered grabbed his attention while what was truly important continued to be casually brushed aside.

“Hey, Willem,” said the man near his bedside, a grin hiding what he was really thinking.

“...Willem?”

“Yeah. That's your name. You forgot it, didn'tcha?”

Willem. Willem. Right. So that was his name.

Now that he heard it, it certainly did have familiar ring to it. But he never would've noticed if the man hadn't mentioned it, which meant—

“Did I lose my memory?” he asked.

He immediately realized how weird of a question that was. The only one who could tell if his memory was gone was he himself. It wasn't something he could ask someone else about, at least. Just as that thought crossed his mind—

“You could say that.” An unexpected response. “Here, I'll explain the whole thing easily for you:

“Right now, you've got something nasty rooted in your memory and personality. Your physical body'll go to shit if we leave it out in the open. So I personally put a lid on a big part of your memory to seal it shut. It's a makeshift, emergency measure, but it's *my* doing, so it's not gonna be torn apart that easily. You can go ahead and cry and grovel at my feet in thanks.”

“Wait, what's *easy* about all that?”

“Shut up. Who's the one who showed up at my doorstep a total mess in the first place?”

He had no choice but to fall silent when he said that.

“...You talking about me? Don't remember.”

"Both you and this kid here. You two sure hit it off, bringin' in nuisances like that."

The man patted the girl from before, his big palm heavy on her head.

"Ow! Ow!"

"Don't worry, 's not like this is gonna kill you again after all that."

He roughly mussed her hair around.

"No, ow! Stop!"

"Bah-ha-ha-ha, all right, all right."

Willem sat up from the bed.

Willem's arm moved faster than his own eye could see. He swiped the man's hand away and pulled the girl closer to him. Her small, light body sat right on his chest with a thud.

"Eek!" she squeaked.

She's cold, he thought. Kids this small typically had much higher body temperatures.

"I don't know what's going on, but cut that out. She doesn't like it."

"...Right." As the man responded, bewildered, the look in his eyes softened. It was like he was observing something he hadn't seen in a long time.

The girl in his arms fell speechless, held her breath, face flushed, and blinked. It didn't look like she particularly hated it, so he decided to stay that way for the moment.

"And? The way you were talking made it sound like you did something to her."

"Cut it out with that scary look. I didn't do anything she wouldn't like, okay?"

"Are you *sure*? You were just smacking her!"

"Hey now, we're just close. Doesn't it bring a smile to your face? Don't raise your eyebrows at me like that."

"No one else here is smiling. That excuse isn't gonna fly."

He glared at the man.

"You never change, do you...?" the man said, somehow profoundly. "Well, whatever. That there's a living corpse. What we'd call a type of low-class ghost, hilariously."

He pointed at the girl.

"What?"

"Well, that body's immortal to begin with. The curse on her was to turn her into a corpse, and that's what it did in practicality. So I, the special one, undid the curse on her just a little. And her soul, slimmer now that it's been smashed in half, slipped in the gap there. She's just a touch healed—her body about one percent and her soul about fifty percent better."

"Wait, what on earth are you talking about?"

Corpse? Ghost? Immortal? Soul?

He thought (because he had no memory so he couldn't make an accurate judgment) those weren't things one typically heard. Not something that fit the little girl in his arms, at least.

"Don't believe me? Peel 'em back and take a look for yourself. Her heart's still sliced in half. Hasn't healed."

"What?"

He *really* wondered what this guy was talking about, but he decided to do what he said for the time being. He hooked his finger on the collar of the girl's clothes and pulled. He peeked in through the gap.

—And there it was: a wide, deep stab wound in her chest.

No matter how he looked at it, it was fatal. Any proper living thing wouldn't stay that way once this was inflicted on them.

"Wha...?"

"See? Told you. I'll make a mistake sometimes here 'n' there, but I never, ever tell a lie."

That didn't strike him as something one should say so proudly, but that didn't matter for now. He turned his gaze back toward the girl's chest, just trying to figure out what was even going on—

Hmm?

He looked up at the girl. Even though she shouldn't have had any blood circulating through her, her face was flushed bright red. Tears were quickly pooling in the corners of her eyes, as though she was going to burst out crying at any moment.

He was already too late when he understood why.

"Stuuuupid!!!"

She slammed both of her hands onto his cheeks.

The man was cackling.

"What's so funny?"

"Your face, what else? It's pure art how red it is. Look in a mirror."

He could picture it. He didn't want to go out of his way to look.

Instead, he looked toward the door the girl had dashed out through.

When he thought back with a cool head, it was obvious to him that he'd failed just now. Girls were still girls, even— No, *especially* girls as young as she was. He should've been more careful.

Wait—she might've been a little girl, but she was still a corpse. But even if she was a corpse, she was still a girl. Why was a corpse moving around anyway? Immortal? Why? *Ah crap, I don't get any of this.*

"...Well, let's forget about it for now. Let me be serious with you." The man's voice dropped to a low tone. "How much can you remember, either about yourself or anything else?"

"About myself...?"

He thought for a bit.

First, since he was able to have this conversation, that meant he hadn't forgotten the common language of the island cluster. He could remember

the names of various things in the room—he looked around to make sure—without a problem.

But anything about himself? Nothing. Where had he been? Who was he close to? What was he doing? All the things he liked, all the things he would never tolerate—none of that information surfaced from the depths of his mind. It didn't go well whenever he tried recalling a personal memory; getting in his way was a pressure akin to him diving deep into a bottomless swamp.

But still, he forced his hand deep into the mud of his memories—
—and there was someone, smiling sadly at him.

"Gh—?!"

A sudden headache. He pressed on his forehead.

"Stop. I made the seal for a reason. Don't waste it," the man grumbled. "Right now, you're on a very thin line where you can still be yourself. You step over that, and nothin' but a great big fall's waiting for you. Everything that was you will disappear. When that happens, there's nothin' I can do. Got it? If you value your life, you will never, ever try to remember."

"...What if I had something I had to do?"

If he kept his eyes closed and his fingers pressed on his forehead, his headache slowly abated.

"Give it up." The man shrugged. "I'm not sayin' this out of spite, you hear? I dunno what you wanted to do, but the second you remember what it was, you'll stop being yourself. And that thing that's not you will in no way accomplish what you wanted. I'm saying that either way, it won't happen."

His logic was correct. He basically had no way to refuse besides turning him down emotionally.

But the feeling to do so never came to him. He couldn't really say no.

"...Right."

For some reason, he felt a slight weight lift from him at that moment. When the man said he didn't have to remember his past and didn't have to shoulder all the things that came with it, he felt like he'd been saved somehow.

His headache disappeared, but his mind and gut still felt heavy.

He tossed his head back onto the pillow.

"I'll follow your advice. I can't remember what you did, but seems like it's true you took good care of me."

"Well, just sleep a little more. Next time you get up, that screwy head o' yours should be a bit better."

A sudden drowsiness overcame him.

"...Yeah," he responded blankly. "Oh right, there's something I wanna ask you."

"What?"

"You and the kid. What're your names?"

"Right... Yeah, you're right. Man, I completely forgot." The man scratched his head as he spoke. "I'm Nils. The little 'un's Elq. And your name's Willem."

Nils.

And Elq.

"I feel like I've heard both your names before. Did we originally know each other?"

"Yeah. You used to look up to me and call me master," the man said with such pride and a stupid look on his face.

"Nah, that never happened."

"Don't doubt me! I don't tell lies, remember?!"

"Nah, c'mon, there's no way. You don't look like the kind of person who teaches people anything, y'know?"

"I'm tellin' you—it's the truth! Why's this the only detail you refuse to believe?!"

"Natural virtue."

"You used to say that crap all the time! You know your memory's supposed to be sealed, right?!"

Well, even he thought it was a little odd, too.

He understood that his attitude wasn't something that was meant for someone he'd met for the first time. It felt strangely right to banter with him. And that made it feel like he'd come back to his distant hometown for the first time in a long time.

"You're more like my damn old man than a master."

"...Seriously, kid..." Nils sighed deeply. "Ah, whatever. I'm headin' out, so get some rest."

"Thanks for everything."

"If you were gonna thank me so sincerely all along, then you shoulda done that first. Sheesh."

Though the man's back was to him, he could still tell the man was smirking from over his shoulder.

He didn't turn back to face him; Willem guessed he might be embarrassed.

"—Oh yeah." Nils stood right by the door and added one more thing as though it just crossed his mind. "Don't use your right eye too much. My seal only works on changes to the spirit, 'kay? Changes to your body stay as is. The seal'll come undone if you get too used to it."

"My right eye?"

"Take a look for yourself. There's a mirror there."

The door shut. His footsteps faded away.

In the spot he last gestured to with his chin was a desktop mirror, small enough to fit in his palm.

Why the hell...? He felt somewhat grumpy, but he couldn't just ignore it. He dragged his lethargic, sleepy body out from the bed, took the mirror in his hand, and looked at his own face.

“.....”

Before him was the face of a dark-haired young man who lacked ambition.

The first thing he noticed was how both his cheeks were red and swollen with little handprints.

The second thing was how his right eye...and *only* his right eye blazed in a gold color, almost like that of a savage animal. His left eye was the same black as his hair, so that was most likely his original color. That was probably the proof that something terrible inside him was trying to do terrible things to him, just like Nils said.

“...I get it now.”

Unease swelled up inside him just by looking at the gold. Whatever it was, it wasn't something good. Now that he firmly believed that, he shut his right eye.

He then crawled under the blanket and slowly shut his remaining eye.



“Mr. Nils? He left very early this morning.”

The next morning, the innkeeper—who was, surprisingly, a featureless man—informed him.

“Huh?”

“He told me he's going on a bit of a trip and isn't sure if he'll be able to return. He also said to be well.”

“Wait, wait, hold on. I didn't hear anything about this?”

“He's the sort to get up and go without much forethought, you see. From the way he phrased it, he might come back out of the blue sometime soon, but who knows when that will be?”

“Wait, what?”

How much of a wanderer was that old man?

He'd been on the receiving end of all his help, so maybe he shouldn't be thinking about it like this, but he wanted him to spend at least more than two seconds thinking about the people he was leaving behind. He couldn't remember his past, so it wasn't like he had any assets to his name. It wasn't normal to leave someone who didn't know left from right from up from down all on their own. At least, he himself would be too afraid to do it.

The man said Willem had once called him “*master*.” There was no way that was true. Willem couldn't imagine himself looking up to that irresponsible man as a master.

“Oh, it seems your companion is awake.”

Wondering who it was, he turned around, and peeking out from behind a corner in the hallway was the face of the redheaded girl—Elq.

“My companion?”

“So I've been told.”

Okay. So that's how he explained it. By leaving himself out.

Willem grew increasingly irritated by his savior and gently beckoned the girl to come closer. Elq acted hesitant at first, but she soon showed herself and rushed toward him.

"M-morning..."

"Sorry about yesterday."

He bowed his head. Elq stared up at him blankly.

"Oh... I-it's okay. As long as you understand... Um, besides, I'm not that mad anymore..."

"I see. You're very kind, Elq."

He lifted his head and smiled at her.

For some reason, Elq gave a short "urk!" and took a half step away from him.

"What is it?"

"N-nothing."

It was unusual to hear a "*nothing*" that sounded so unconvincing. He thought about teasing her by pressing the question, but that wouldn't be very mature of him, so he refrained.

Both Willem and Elq had apparently been found relatively near each other. And just like him, she'd been saved by Nils, too. And together, they had both been left behind by Nils.

He didn't know how long they'd known each other, but they were in this together, so it was probably best if they got along. Probably.

First, he needed to get ready to start leading a new life. He needed to get a grasp on what he could and couldn't do. He needed to find work, too. Elq was still little, so he had to make enough money to support her, too.

And when Nils came back, he'd give him an earful. There was no chance he'd forget that.

"By the way, I still haven't received payment for last night's stay—what do you want to do about that?"

He made one adjustment to his previous statement.

When Nils came back, he'd give him a good punch to go along with the earful. There was no chance he'd forget that.

"...D'you know of any places around here that would hire a featureless who doesn't know a thing about himself?"

"Sure. I can think of one off the top of my head."

Apparently, there was such a place, surprisingly enough. He'd doubted there would be when he asked.

"That's a big help. Couldja introduce me?"

"You'll also be served three square meals a day, and they won't mind if you have a little lady with you."

"That's—"

"And I apologize for taking so long to introduce myself. I'm Astartos, the owner. We may be a small inn, but there's plenty of work to do. Make sure you're up to it, okay?"

He held out his right hand, expecting a handshake.

Damn that Nils. He predicted this would happen and left us behind, didn't he?

He was absolutely convinced that was the case, and he felt sorry for himself now that he had no choice but to take the innkeeper up on his goodwill.

"...Yeah. Thanks."

Fighting the urge to drop his shoulders in disappointment, Willem grasped the man's right hand with his own.

4. Ancient Cities and the Faeries

The faerie warehouse was on Island No. 68.

Collina di Luce was on Island No. 11.

Roughly speaking, these two islands were located on Regule Aire's outskirts and central area, respectively. So naturally, there was quite a bit of distance between the two. And there wasn't an airship route that connected the two places directly or anything convenient like that, so travelers had to be ready to take plenty of detours and transfer airships a number of times.

Things could go much smoother if one of the military patrol ships could drop them off, of course. But those were typically quite cramped; they were very shaky, since they weren't equipped with stabilizing mechanisms; they were very easy to grow depressed in, since the windows were small, and they as passengers were left to sit in the holds with nothing to do; and so many other reasons that made Nygglotho quickly turn down that option with a firm "no." No one disagreed with her. Of course they wouldn't.

They rattled around in various airships for almost an entire day.

"Wow..."

As Lakhesh stepped down from the airship, she looked around, grinning from ear to ear.

"I-it's, it's a-amazing... Tiat, look! Look!"

"Yeah, it is amazing; now please let go of me."

Lakhesh had a tight grip on Tiat's shoulders as she shook her around, and Tiat twisted in protest.

"But look, i-it's real—it's the real thing...!"

"I know, I know, I know it's the real thing, so let go."

"Woooooow!"

Lakhesh was over the moon.

Well, Rhantolk could see why.

Because this was none other than the city of Collina di Luce—the jewel box of the azure sky, the melting pot of dreams and romance.

The faeries weren't allowed to leave Island No. 68 without permission. That's why their only chances to learn about the other islands were through stories in books or projections. And most of the brightest, most attractive stories took place here in the city of Collina di Luce. This was where the Second Cloaked stole a million bradal from an evil crime ring, where Rustnose met his true love, where the Minchuette Clan had endured such a

tumultuous time... The faeries had watched and read all these stories with incredible yearning.

And now they could stand on this stage for the first time with their own feet. That was something so unbearably happy for them.

Even if it wasn't the first time for them, it was still pretty exciting, to be perfectly honest.

"...And where will we be going from here?" Rhantolk asked Nyggglatho quietly after taking a deep breath; she felt it would be unbecoming of her to show her excitement.

"Hmm. We ultimately have something to do at command headquarters, but I suppose before that, we'll have to hand Lakhesh over to my classmate's place."

"Your classmate?"

"Remember? He's the one who also took care of your adjustments when you matured—the big cyclops doctor. He was in the class above me when I was a student at the academy."

"Well, that sure is a frightening combination. I bet your classmates didn't feel alive until they graduated, huh?" Ithea butted in.

"How rude. I didn't do that many things that were too dangerous." Nyggglatho's denial didn't even sound like a denial. Maybe it was best if they left the subject alone. "...Come on, Lakhesh, Tiat. We're going." She grabbed both the shaker and the shakee. "We're not here to sightsee. Let us do what we need to do."

"Oh... S-sorry." Lakhesh came back down to earth and meekly bowed her head.

"Ooooooh, the island's spinning..."

Tiat was still out of it, her eyes swimming. She'd probably recover in a little bit, so no harm done.

"Well then, shall we go?" Nyggglatho asked, adjusting the large rucksack on her back.

Poking out from the top of the tough leather bag were several oblong objects wrapped in cloth. Inside were dug weapons...four Carillon: Ithea's Valgulous, Rhantolk's Historia, Tiat's Ignareo, and one more sword without an owner, just for good luck. Altogether, they weighed about as much as a small wardrobe (a full one), but she carried them in a way that made them seem much lighter.

"I want both of you to behave. We have a little walk to make before we reach our destination, so be sure not to get distracted and get lost, okay?"

"O-okay, I'll do my best."

It worried Nyggglatho that this was something Lakhesh felt she had to do her best at, but she would recognize how optimistic she was.

"...Could we take little detours along the way? There are a lot of things I didn't get to see last time."

And she wished Tiat would try a little harder.

"Don't make me repeat myself. You know we're not here to sightsee, right?" She placed her hands on her hips and spoke sharply, and Tiat shrank back, falling silent.

Nygglotho wondered if she'd gone too far, but she couldn't think of anything else to say to comfort her. It was fine, though, because Tiat had already grown up to be a wonderful adult faerie soldier; she knew she could keep herself in line...or so she thought.

"Ooooh, ooh, is that the Falcita Memorial Plaza?!"

And there Lakhesh went, right after Nygglotho said no sightseeing.

"And in the middle there, that's a statue of the Great Sage, right?! Can I go take a look up close?!"

Rhantolk whirled around to look. There was a plaza with a fountain. Countless couples milled about, and there was the statue of an intrepid old man with a large hood over his head.

It was apparently sculpted in the likeness of the Great Sage, the legendary man who was said to have created the foundation for the birth of Regule Aire and who still watched over them today. And there was apparently a rumor about it that the statue could strengthen the bond of a relationship. It was unclear if that was true or not, but that didn't seem to matter to the lovebirds who gathered there as various couples of all races whispered sweet nothings to each other around it.

...Right. Even if they were allowed to make pit stops, Rhantolk had a feeling that wasn't a place to take little children. Or something like that.

"I wanna go see it, too! Willem said no last time we were here, so I didn't get to see it!"

Tiat took the opportunity to jump on the bandwagon, but Rhantolk brought her fist lightly down onto her head.

"Didn't you hear? No distractions, no side trips. We're going on ahead."

She repeated what was already said, and both Lakhesh and Tiat deflated. Thirty minutes later.

It was quite distressing.

Rhantolk took stock mentally, desperately wiping away the stress that gathered in her mind like a cold sweat.

She looked to the right. Stone buildings lined a large avenue. All kinds of different people went this way and that. Horse-drawn carts rushed by with loud clattering noises.

She looked to the left. There was a long black iron fence and a neatly maintained garden on the other side of it. An unobtrusive green covered the whole lot, likely because it was a little too early for spring. It probably wouldn't even be a month before everything would be in bloom, displaying a whole assortment of different colors. She was a little sad she wouldn't be able to see it. But wait, this wasn't the time for that.

It went without saying that both these sights were unfamiliar to her.

And—this was the true nature of her problem—she didn't see anyone she'd been traveling with, neither Nygglotho nor Ithea nor Tiat nor Lakhesh, anywhere.

"What a fix I'm in."

She pressed her temples and closed her eyes.

She recalled what had happened. It was very simple. As they walked through the city, a distant building had suddenly caught her attention.

It was the steeple of a famous cathedral that she'd read about in a book. The book said it was built by a genius architect three hundred years ago and the structure was only one of the seven grand-scale buildings built by this architect in all of Regule Aire. It said its unique silhouette captured the hearts even of those who spotted it from a distance.

Indeed—the book was right. When she noticed its silhouette, she was captivated for just a moment (at least, that's how long she intended it to be), but then by the time she returned to her senses, she'd gotten separated from the others.

"This is awful."

She'd made such a blunder right after acting all high and mighty, reminding the littler ones that there would be no distractions or getting lost. She had never imagined that, of all things, she herself would be making such a mistake.

Their destination here on Collina di Luce was the general clinic. It was a place Rhantolk herself had been once when she matured. She had only a vague memory of it, but she could probably find the way there. In the worst-case scenario, she could fly in the sky and check the path that way. She didn't want to stand out too much, but it would be better than being fatally late for their meet-up.

"Anyway, I suppose I'll start walking."

Luckily, Collina di Luce was a commerce city that had plenty of interaction with various other islands, so featureless like the faeries weren't all that unusual to the people who walked the streets. As long as she didn't do anything conspicuous, she wouldn't stand out.

As long as she kept walking, she became a part of the city's scenery.

When she thought about it that way, she forgot about her situation, and her steps grew lighter.

Another seven minutes later.

"...Wow."

Rhantolk once again learned how truly formidable this city was.

That was because after just a few steps down the street, she would encounter something fascinating. She saw famous buildings, then little side streets that caught her eye, then bronze statues built right into the center of the road for no logical reason. The city had so much to offer, she never tired of it.

Every single time she found something as she walked alone, her feet would stop.

This wasn't good. She had to seriously start thinking about making some progress, otherwise the sun might actually set on her.

She jogged down the avenue, the panic pushing her along, and turned a corner.

"...Wow."

And she encountered another magnificent building.

It was the Collina di Luce Great Central Library. It was a huge marvel of a library, counted among the oldest existing buildings in Collina di Luce, as well as prided as having the largest collection of books in the entire island cluster.

Its tower was elegant and chalky white, still preserved so after such a long history. Rhantolk thought she was ready, but her attention was suddenly stolen again. And her legs, carried away by the panic to keep rushing forward, still unconsciously moved. As a result—

"Eek!"

"Oof!"

—she ran into something wall-like.

Rhantolk was thrown back, falling hard on her rear on the spot.

"Ouch..."

"Oh, my apologies. I was looking elsewhere."

"Oh, no, I wasn't looking in front of me, either..."

It seemed she hadn't actually run into a wall but rather a featureless old man of a great, boulder-like stature, with golden hair and a golden beard. As though it wasn't already enough, the man's gaudy, pure-white cape made him stand out in a bad way, for some reason. It even stood out from the rest of the scenery of Collina di Luce, which was accepting of people from all walks of life.

But even after seeing who it was with her own eyes, she still doubted for a split second that what she ran into wasn't really a wall. She wasn't sure why, but she could sense a deep and mysterious force from him that gave her the impression of a rock-solid entity.

"Are you hurt?"

Even his words of concern were filled with an intimidating air that hung over her.

She was still impressed by this historical metropolis—there were lovely gentlemen dressed like this walking around like it was no big deal, and that was beyond anything she could have imagined in multiple ways.

"Oh...no. Thank you."

She timidly grasped his extended hand and stood up.

He wore a kind smile, but it wasn't enough to hide the sharp, stinging gaze behind it.

Even though she was a seasoned veteran, if she didn't consciously try to keep herself together, her legs might give way.

"Oh... By the way, young lady, I feel this conversation of ours must be fate. Do you think I could ask you for directions?"

A brief silence.

"Sorry?"

"See, I know this is a bit embarrassing, but I'm actually a little lost."

He was scratching his cheek, likely out of awkwardness. It didn't suit him.

"I knew I had to ask someone for directions but, see...talking to people as they rush by isn't really my forte."

"Huh."

She could see how. His presence dominated everything around him, even when he was just standing there. She couldn't really see him calling out to someone for a friendly chat.

"I wouldn't mind, but I'm not a local so I can't say that I know the streets very well. I'm not sure I can help." She, of course, decided not to mention that she herself was practically lost as well. "And where is it you're hoping to go?"

"A restaurant. It's right by the general clinic, I hear."

Well then! Rhantolk thought.

"I need to go that way as well. Would you mind coming along?"

"Yes, that would be wonderful."

The old man smiled.

Or at least, the wrinkles in his ancient, bark-like face deepened and took the shape of what seemed like a smile. It was an intense expression, one that would make little kids cry if they saw it.

Thinking how glad she was to be a grown-up, the edge of Rhantolk's mouth twitched upward slightly.

"I've been here before, you see. I told them I remembered the way and refused a guide," the old man grumbled as they walked down the street.

Walking alongside him—thinking she probably seemed like a maid waiting on a king—Rhantolk gave a disinterested "mm" in response.

"But when I tried to make the walk on my own, what did I find? All the streets were changed!"

"Mm."

That shouldn't be possible.

Collina di Luce was an old city. There were lots of definitions as to what constituted an "old" city, but one of them had to be that the buildings had stayed where they were for a very long time. So the streets changing was something that couldn't happen.

As far as Rhantolk knew, the neighborhood around the great library hadn't gone through major rezoning for a hundred or so odd years.

... Well, I suppose he is getting on in age.

She thought that perhaps it wouldn't be all too odd if his memory was a little jumbled, but that was a rude thing to think.

"I don't often get this chance, so I thought it might be nice to do some sightseeing while I was at it. But I can't let people wait for me forever, you know."

"Oop—"

It was like an invisible thorn plunged into her chest.

"But this is a city you can't just walk through, right? I'll have to come back another day just to be a tourist."

"Do you live on an island far from here?"

"Yes, there is some distance involved, but the biggest trouble—"

The old man suddenly lifted his gaze.

Rhantolk followed suit and looked up as well.

"Oh."

There was Nygglotho on the other side of the street. She was very easy to spot, since she stood a head taller than all the passersby. And she seemed to have noticed Rhantolk as well. She quickly cut across the avenue and drew nearer.

"I finally found you! Gosh, I was so worried!"

"I'm sorry."

She had no excuses. Rhantolk bowed her head sincerely.

"I was wondering what I would do if you got hit by a carriage! You're all so strong when you fight, but you're not that tough under normal circumstances—you know that."

"That's... Yes...I know."

Almost half the strength a leprechaun had in battle was a result of activated venenum. And the other half was from the dug weapons in their hands. Put simply, they had practically none of the strength they wielded on the battlefield during normal daily life.

But beyond that, most living things wouldn't be okay after getting hit by a carriage—faeries weren't unique in this. And of course, Nygglotho knew she didn't fit into "most" living things.

"Pulled meat is always better when done with a proper machine, you know."

"Um... Sorry?"

Rhantolk wasn't too sure what Nygglotho was trying to say. But she was sure she'd made her worry...she thought. She wanted to honestly thank her and reflect on her mistakes.

"Oh... Sorry to interrupt, ma'am," the old man butted in from beside her. "You don't have to reprimand her that much. I'm just a passing tourist, see, but I'd gotten lost. I took this kind girl up on her offer to show me the way."

"Huh?"

What is this old man talking about all of a sudden?

"I do have a few connections, so if this has caused you any inconvenience, I take it upon myself to make amends for it. That's why I ask that you don't scold your little sister too harshly."

"My..." Nygglotho was slightly astonished. "Is that so?"

"Um... Well, I guess...it is true?"

Rhantolk was perplexed, of course. They had just been walking in a way that made her look like the guide, sure. But it was completely her own fault

that she had gotten herself lost in the first place, and there shouldn't have been much room for her to make excuses.

And while they were at it, she and Nygglotho weren't sisters.

"Well then, what can I say?" Nygglotho was somehow proudly exasperated. "No one's found out so far, and there haven't been any problems. I don't want to say you can't show others kindness, either. But be sure to say something next time, okay?"

"Oh... Yes, I...understand." Rhantolk nodded, going with it.

"And you, sir."

"Hmm?"

"I know you must've felt terribly helpless having lost your way, but I am not impressed that you decided to reach out to a young girl and walk around with her. Someone is going to see that and think you're kidnapping her, you know?"

"Oh... Ahhh, you're right. You're exactly right."

"Kidnappings that target tourists aren't too uncommon in Collina di Luce. If you need directions, there are plenty of golems from the tourism bureau stationed around the city, so you should ask them next time, okay?"

Her tone was kind yet strict, like she was admonishing a child for their pranks.

After a short moment of silence, the perplexed old man suddenly burst out in explosive laughter. Every single person passing by turned to look at them, the pigeons resting their wings on the streetlights all leaped up into the air, and a horse pulling a carriage several paces away got worked up and went out of control.

"...Sir?"

"No, I'm sorry." The old man held back his laughter, wiped away the tears in the corners of his eyes, and began to explain himself. "There hasn't been anyone who has taken that tone with me for a very long time. It's also the first time in a while that a young woman has stood before me without fear, and for that, I'm grateful. It's unusual for me, but for a moment, it felt like I'd gotten a little younger."

"Okay..."

Well, sure. The old man had both a face and build that were terrifying, and even his enigmatic presence was frightening. But that was all. Nygglotho didn't think that was enough to scare everyone.

"Alright then, I know the way on my own from this point. I cannot take up any more of your time, so I will pardon myself shortly."

"...Will you really be all right?"

"Hmm, if I get lost again, I just need to ask a golem, don't I?" he said, briefly winking.

It was an expert wink.

"Thanks for the fun time."

As they watched the old man disappear down the avenue, the two tilted their heads slightly.

"I feel like I've seen him somewhere before. And recently, at that," Nygglatho said, and Rhantolk, too, noticed the stirring feeling of unease inside her.

"Maybe we've met him before... But if we did, I don't think I'd forget someone who would leave such a strong impression like that..."

"Hmmm. If both of us recognized him, then maybe we saw him on Island No. 68? But I don't think that's it..."

They couldn't find the answer. And since they couldn't, their heads stayed tilted.

Falcita Memorial Plaza, with the stone statue of the greatest wise man of Regule Aire, the Great Sage, was right nearby the street the two of them had just passed.



"All right, then, can I have the one who saw the dream come here?"

"M-me! I-I-I'll be right *dddere!*"

Lakshesh was led away by a doctor in a lab coat and headed for her adjustments to become an adult faerie soldier.

And it seemed like it really hurt when she bit down on her tongue so hard like that.

"She probably isn't that far."

Nygglatho scratched her cheek with a worried look as she left to go search for Rhantolk.

"I can't believe she's making me worry like this. I'll punish her with a big, strong hug if she's not okay."

They said Nygglatho's strongest embrace, incidentally, could shatter a boulder.

And with all that happening, there were only two left.

They were pushed into a simple waiting room in a secluded corner of the clinic and told, "Wait here until you receive your next orders." And there was no comment as to when those orders might come, of course.

"Wonder where Rhan went?" Ithea murmured, bored, in her chair.

"I bet I know where she went—the Perjurer's Grave!" Tiat answered as she hopped by the wall, wanting a peek at the scenery outside from a window that was just out of reach.

"We passed right by it, though! It's one of the most popular spots that you *have* to see when you come to Collina di Luce! No fair!"

"Rhan's not like you. She has a little more self-restraint when it comes to that stuff, y'know?"

"Rustnose said beauty confounds the heart!"

"Is that what the context of that phrase is s'posed to be?" Ithea tilted her head in puzzlement. "Either way, sure is boring here. Wanna play a word game or somethin'?"

"I'm not bored! I'm really busy right now, okay!"

"Oh yeah?"

Ithea laid her head down on the table, watching Tiat from behind as she jumped up and down.

Of course, all she had to do was kindle some venenum and fly up. But Tiat hadn't realized that, and Ithea wasn't about to point it out to her.

"Ooooh, c'mon, legs! All the physical training we've gone through has been for this very day!"

"You're such a peaceful kid..."

When Ithea looked up at the window from where she sat, she could perfectly see the blue sky beyond it. It looked the same no matter where she stared up at it, whether it was from Island No. 68 or Island No. 11. That was all she could see from her spot.

Then there was a light knock on the waiting room door.

"Are those our orders?"

Ithea lifted her head. The door opened.

"Hello...?"

The one who hesitantly came into the room wasn't Nygglotho or a doctor or a soldier.

It was a lycanthrope girl with soft-looking white fur.

"Hey, aren't you—?"

"Miss Phyr?! Wow, it's been so long!"

Tiat recalled the girl's name before Ithea could.

It was Phyracorlybia Dorio, the mayor's daughter.

Several months ago, Ithea and Tiat took a short tour around Collina di Luce with her guidance—or more precisely, through Willem's trickery. For leprechauns who never had any contact with the world outside of Island No. 68, it had been a unique and unforgettable experience.

"Miss Ithea, Miss Tiat..." Phyr's expression was stiff for some reason as she glanced around the room. "I knew it—they're not here. Miss Chtholly and Miss Nephren, I mean..."

"Phyr?"

"My apologies..."

She entered the room, closed the door behind her, and sat on the floor on the spot.

"I had no idea. I had no idea who you were. All the days we simply whittle away only exist thanks to your sacrifice..."

"Huh?"

Tiat's eyes grew wide.

"Ahhh... I see." Ithea understood what the sudden apology meant and scratched at the back of her head. "Who told you about us?"

"I just happened to overhear my uncle and my father talking."

Her uncle was First Officer Limeskin, who had known her ever since she was little. And her father was Gil-Andalus Dorio, the city's mayor.

It was unclear as to why leprechauns would come up in conversation between the two, but regardless, it seemed to be true that Phyr ended up finding out about them, despite how they were meant to be secret weapons.

"All I worry about is which jam I should put on my scones for lunch while you risk your lives in battle. I had no idea, and I lived my days not feeling a hint of shame about it. I feel so humiliated, and I'm so sorry...", she confessed, hiding her face, on the verge of breaking into tears.

"Ummm, I, uhhh..." Tiat was bewildered.

"Uhhh, okay. I appreciate the honest reaction, but Phyr?"

"Yes?"

"Times like these, we're not gonna say that you shouldn't worry, because we're disposable weapons to begin with. I'd say you've got a good head on your shoulders. You're from a good background, and you believe that there are more good people in the world than evil. I'm not gonna force someone like that to come to terms with that fact. So think about it this way: We're just secretly stretching our lives thin so all the regular people who live on Regule Aire can live their normal lives stress-free and without them knowing a thing."

"Normal lives...for people who don't know anything..."

"Exactly. So don't be ashamed that you didn't know anything. That is precisely why we fight, and I guess you could say we're almost proud of it in some way."

"Oooh..." Tiat sounded impressed. Maybe she was finally conscious of all that.

"So chin up, okay? At the very least, we haven't been risking our lives just to see our friends cry."

"Miss...Ithea..."

"And quit with the 'miss' stuff, 'kay?"

She scratched her head. And—

Clack.

The door opened again, and this time, a faerie with indigo hair—in other words, Rhantolk—peeked in.

"Sorry I worried you all—"

Rhantolk paused partway through her apology. She looked around the room.

Ithea had her elbows planted on the table, Tiat was plastered up against the wall and only her head was turned toward the door, and an unfamiliar lycanthrope sat in the middle of the floor.

"...What's going on here?"

"Now, that's a difficult question!" Ithea forced a loud laugh, small creases deepening between her brows. "But wait, you're alone, Rhan? I thought Nygglotho went to get you?"

"Yes, but a messenger from First Officer Limeskin caught ahold of her just back there." She gestured toward the entrance of the clinic. "She went off with him, and they left. She told me to wait here with you two."

"She went with him? Where?"

"I don't know, but I don't think we need to worry."

"You're right—we don't need to worry at all."

They both nodded to each other.

"...Um?"

Phyr, who wasn't keeping up with the conversation, tilted her head with tears still in her eyes.

"And, and? What did you see? You saw the Perjurer's Grave, didn't you?! Or did you go all the way to Barley Square?! I know that one's a little far, though."

And Tiat was, well, the way she always was.



"This way, Miss Nygglotho."

"Yes?"

"First Officer Limeskin is expecting you."

A smaller lizardfolk messenger was waiting for Nygglotho. He was probably more of an average size, considering individual lizardfolk stopped growing at vastly different times, but just looked a lot smaller, since she was used to Limeskin's gargantuan stature.

"We just arrived, so why can't I rest for a moment?"

No response.

It was somehow very military-like not to waste any words.

"Everyone is already waiting for you."

"Who do you mean by 'everyone'?"

No response. *Right, fine.*

The messenger led Nygglotho out the back entrance of the clinic, and they passed through a dim alley that smelled of soap and sewage. When she glanced up, she saw ropes that hung between windows on either side of the alley and laundry hanging from them.

—*Where are we going?*

It was a burning question, but a taciturn air hung around the messenger's form, and it didn't seem like she'd get an answer even if she did ask.

—*If they specifically called for me without any of the girls, then that means there'll be lots of pesky talk they shouldn't hear. Am I right?*

The thought made her melancholy.

Then the delicious scent of burned meat tickled her nose. When she looked up, there was a little sign that indicated the back door to a restaurant. As Nygglotho thought about what to do for dinner, the messenger opened the small back door and stepped inside the building.

"Here?" she asked, but of course, no response. The lizardfolk glanced back briefly, signaling her to follow inside, then passed quickly down the short corridor.

The inside decorations looked very handsome.

"Oh dear, I'm not breaking the dress code, am I?"

Nygglotho looked down at the dress she was wearing. Her outfit was just something she thought was cute based on her own standards, but they were still nothing more than regular attire. And she had just spent the entire day sitting in airships anyway, so it was even hard to say she was polished up.

The lizardfolk was quickly disappearing down the hall.

She mentally complained to herself that this messenger should at least make *some* sort of conversation with her, then followed suit.

They stopped before a heavy-looking door.

The messenger's clawed hand knocked—twice quickly, followed by a pause, then a third time.

"Enter," came a low voice. Nygglotho was slightly awestruck: *Goodness, what a rather authentic code!*

The door opened.

There was a large table in the room. Unfortunately, there was no food on it. Surrounding the table were faces both familiar and unfamiliar.

"...What?"

By the wall stood Limeskin in his Guard uniform. Well, she wasn't terribly surprised about that, since he was the one who summoned her here in the first place.

Standing beside him was a rabbitfolk soldier. She glanced at the insignia on his shoulder, which depicted a shield and scythe. That was of the military police, if she remembered correctly.

A middle-aged lycanthrope sat at the table. He didn't seem familiar to her. He wore a well-made suit and a sophisticated monocle. He looked ever so much a gentleman and, at the very least, suited this fancy restaurant much more than Nygglotho did.

For some reason, the old man with the white cape who they had just parted ways with was there, too. He made a surprised "oh?", and judging by the expression that matched, this encounter was just as unexpected for him as it was for her.

And then, one more.

There was an exceptionally special face, one that easily made her forget about every other one she'd just seen.

It was a gray-haired girl.

For some reason, she held her left eye shut tight, but there was no doubt about it. She was a faerie soldier, one who should have been lost in the battle on the surface.

"Neph...ren?"

"Mm."

Nephren put her head a little to the side.

"Are you...real?"

"At least half of me."

The response she received was one she didn't quite understand, but she could barely hear it anyway.

She wanted to rush to her, squeeze her, pinch her cheeks, burst out in tears. All those impulses bubbled up inside her at once, swelled, and then burst.

Nygglotho fell to her rear on the spot on the shaggy carpet.

"I... I'm terribly sorry for such an embarrassing display..."

Nygglotho took a seat after she was offered one.

And she also grasped a grumpy-looking Nephren and forced her to sit on her lap.

The men's gazes, seeming as though they were watching a heartwarming scene (in fact, probably because they *were* watching a heartwarming scene), were hard to bear. But she wasn't going to let her go.

"You're putting on an embarrassing display, in the present tense."

"Be quiet now."

She wasn't going to listen to complaints, either.

"...Now then, allow me to introduce myself once more." The lycanthrope, still seated, bowed his head slightly. "My name is Gil-Andalus Dorio. I am the elected mayor by the people of this city."

"Oh." Nygglotho froze. "Er, um, I'm Nygglotho of the Orlandry Merchants Alliance..."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Nygglotho. And this here—"

"Coincidences are awesome things, aren't they? ...We met earlier, didn't we, young lady?" The old man in the white cape cut off Mr. Dorio, and he winked again. "My apologies for not giving my name earlier. I am Suowong. I act as a sort of adviser for The Winged Guard."

"Oh, okay... Nice to meet you."

The mayor and a retired guardsman—why were these people secretly meeting in a place like this, and why was she invited? She couldn't quite put the whole thing together.

"Er, and...I don't really understand the situation. What is going on right now? Why is Nephren here? Could that mean"—*Willem is safe, too?* she was about to ask, but she stopped herself—"that someone else was rescued from the surface safe and sound?"

The air in the room grew a touch heavier.

No one spoke. She figured that wasn't something she was supposed to ask.

"I hope you don't mind if I start by explaining the situation." The rabbitfolk soldier adjusted his glasses as he took a half step forward.

"Go ahead." The white-caped old man nodded generously. The rabbitfolk bowed to him briefly.

"I am First Officer Baroni Makish. A pleasure."

"Oh yes, likewise..."

He was a first officer, which meant he was in just as important a position as Limeskin, who stood next to him.

"First, let me clear something up. The thing you are currently hugging on your knee is not the faerie girl you knew so well. It is something else that has been contaminated by a Beast on the surface and has been psychosomatically altered."

"Huh..."

She didn't quite understand what he said.

She gave Nephren's cheek a poke. It was soft, the kind of soft she wanted to boil in water and take a big bite out of. It was a very familiar sensation, one that hadn't changed at all.

What did he say she was? Something contaminated by a Beast?

"Additionally... I believe you already know there are no forecasted Timere attacks at the moment."

Of course she did. Nygglotho nodded.

"We have identified the cause—Chtholly Nota Seniorious."

What?

"In order for Timere to attack in the sky, it needs a body over a certain size that it can divide, the pieces of which catch on the wind and drift here by chance. Essentially, they only form when the large numbers required gather together first.

"However, in the earlier battle at the K96-M.A.L. Ruins, Chtholly destroyed an extreme number of Timeres. Moreover, ones that should've been sleeping underground came out of the ground, and she annihilated them."

"Chtholly...did that?"

"There has been a remarkable decrease in the number of Timeres on the surface. They might not be entirely exterminated, but it will take a considerable amount of time for them to encroach upon the sky again."

"That girl threw away... No, ussssed up her whole life to protect our home, Regule Aire."

What Limeskin said didn't quite reach Nygglotho's ears, either.

To sacrifice oneself to save the islands—that was the faeries' original duty. Chtholly wanted to be free of it, so she fought, and she should have come home.

But did it turn out that way in the end?

"...What a clumsy girl she is."

She didn't want to call her death "fate." She didn't want to accept it as that.

She fought until her very last moments, of her own free will, for the people—or maybe just *person*—she loved. And coincidentally, as a result, she saved Regule Aire, too. That's how Nygglotho wanted to see it.

Or maybe that's what the Braves Willem used to talk about were like. They themselves were just fighting for their own selfish reasons. But their fights were twisted into battles of fate or duty, changed into something meant for the whole world.

With no more fighting to be done and the danger gone, Nygglotho should've been happy. She should've been proud.

But for some reason, she felt a bit disappointed.

"This information is spreading not just through The Winged Guard but also among organizations throughout Regule Aire with a certain caliber of intelligence. And they all have reached the same conclusion: Now is the time to rework the entirety of Regule Aire's anti-Beast strategies."

"And...they want to snatch up our dug weapon-compatible faeries, don't they?"

Limeskin had a look that seemed to retort, *You're the one who'sss done the sssnatching.*

Nephren turned to look at Nygglotho. "*What does that mean?*" her expression asked.

Obviously, Nygglotho couldn't just tell her "*a lot of stuff happened, but it's all okay because I beat up the bad guys.*" Instead, she lightly balled her hand into a fist. Hopefully Nephren got the message.

"Indeed. That's part of it."

"...Just a part?"

"What they are asking is for The Winged Guard to relinquish all authority related to combating the Seventeen Beasts. More specifically, the weapons' development, retention, and use in emergencies. Everything related to dug weapons is just an example."

It took time for her to understand what he said.

"The Beasts are enormous foes whose true properties are unknown. By developing and maintaining firepower to stand against them..." She gulped. "...That would mean they want permission for unlimited military expansion."

"That's right. If one is unable to judge exactly how much power is needed to fight back against an enemy, then any sort of power can be justified as *potentially necessary*. Both ethics and the island charter are superseded in the face of that mentality."

People of varying races lived on Regule Aire, some of whom used to be considered predator while others were considered prey. Though they'd reconciled after such a long period of time, they still basically lived in the same place but with differing worldviews.

Naturally, conflict was never-ending, no matter how large or small. It wasn't just a one- or two-time occasion that a large-scale war threatening to involve a great number of islands had been on the verge of breaking out.

The island cluster charter existed to prevent fighting like that. It was established at the dawn of Regule Aire by that legendary Great Sage and was the highest law of the land, constantly in use everywhere, by everyone. Don't kill. Don't steal. No excessive armaments. Those who violated these prohibitions were punished by their island's respective ruling body or, in times when that wasn't possible, by The Winged Guard.

"And that now brings us to the topic at hand."

"...There's more?"

"They also seek the right to use the anti-Beast weapons at their own discretion whenever something happens. That means..."

He looked at her, as though asking her to finish his sentence.

She didn't know.

Nygglotho wasn't a member of the military. She was a member of a merchant company. While she wasn't completely ignorant when it came to the tactics of those who were specialists on both fronts, she couldn't say she completely understood.

"...They can use as much firepower as they want whenever a Beast appears," Nephren murmured in response.

"Exactly." The rabbitfolk nodded.

"...But why? None of the other Beasts besides Timere can fly, so that doesn't really matter now, does it?"

"Sure, on the surface, that's what it seems like. However..."

"...However, if a Beast was to appear on the islands, then they could fight them however they wanted," Nephren said quietly, taking over.

"But that shouldn't be possible..."

"Pardon me. I hope you don't mind if I take over from here." Mayor Dorio, who had been quietly watching the conversation unfold until then, cut in, his characteristic pointed lycanthrope ears twitching. He glanced individually at all the people of high station in the room before continuing. "An incident occurred about two weeks ago. An airship crashed onto this island. It was registered as a civilian salvaging company ship, but that was just a disguise, and we know that the corresponding company does not actually exist. The ship's real name was *Tomorrow Grasper No. 7*. It is one of the Elpis Air Defense Force's surface-observation ships that they keep off the record."

"It was a complete ruin when it fell, but the spot that would've been the cargo hold seemed to have been built to be especially sturdy, and its original shape was still intact," added the old man in the white cape—*Suowong*, was it? "Inside, we found traces of rather high-level capture barrier technology."

What were these people talking about?

She didn't know, or rather, she didn't want to know. She understood well enough what they were talking about that she felt that way.

"Capture barrier technology...?"

"Sturdy enough for even me to say so. *Sturdy enough to contain a Beast.*"

"...Um—"

She didn't quite get what he meant by "*even me*," but from the way things were going, there was only one possible conclusion.

It was all so out of this world that even she couldn't believe her own idea.

"Don't tell me Elpis smuggled a Beast into Regule Aire?"

Ha-ha-ha, don't be absurd! She wanted them to laugh at her.

But not a single person present so much as cracked a smile.

She felt Nephren shiver slightly on her lap.

"Of coursse, it isss naught but a possssibility. We have no evidencsse. There were no tracssesss of a Beassst essscaping from the ssship, and there have been no damagesss, either. And sssso that iss why we have called all the faerie sssoldierssss here in thiss manner."

"We have information that many soldiers from Elpis have infiltrated Island No. 11. There is no question that they'll be trying to pull something here in the near future."

The two soldiers consecutively provided more depressing information.

"...But— That can't be. Why...? Why would they do that?"

"No matter how abnormal these behaviors might seem, it is still true that there are people who are acting this way, so we must react appropriately. Please. Please allow us to keep the faerie soldiers here in the meanwhile and prepare them for the most unlikely emergency."

Mayor Dorio bowed his head.

She cast a glance at the soldiers, and they nodded silently at her.

The Winged Guard as they were now couldn't legally demand the faeries to act for an incident such as this. And so they made it look as though Nygglatho brought the faeries here at her own discretion. Was that it?

"...Very well."

Nygglatho nodded, a bitter lump deep in her throat.

She couldn't shake her head in refusal after hearing all that.

"Though, right, since we're here already, I have just one condition to add."

"But of course. We'll do anything within our power."

The answer came straightaway.

It wasn't her intention to negotiate in a way that took advantage of their weaknesses, but she had the perfect opportunity before her and wasn't about to let it go. She would be an absolute demon if it meant doing something for the girls—disregarding the fact that she was already a demon, of course.

This confusing resolve solidifying in her heart, Nygglatho asked—

"Would you please allow the girls some free time?"

5. The Young Man Named Willem

The scarlet of the setting sun faintly lit the room through the lace curtains.

The only forms in the small room were that of a young man and woman.

"Hah...hah..."

The young tourterelle woman's breath came out ragged atop the rumpled sheets.

"That felt...incredible..."

She suddenly sat up as though recalling something. Then she lightly brushed her reddened cheeks and smoothed out her mussed clothing.

"I got so warm when you touched me, like a fire started burning in me. It almost felt like I'd left my own body."

"Glad to hear it."

Willem sat at the edge of the bed, staring off into space.

Although he could barely remember anything about himself, he was still very much a healthy young man.

And the tourterelle—the strong, light-gray wings on her back aside—looked remarkably similar to a featureless. Her skin was soft and warm when the tips of his fingers made contact, velvety as he ran them across it; he couldn't help his mind going into the gutter when she let out odd noises.

"Your muscles were weirdly stiff in a few spots, so I just eased them up, more or less." He took deep breaths to desperately soothe his excited heartbeat so that she wouldn't find out. "The inflammation shouldn't get any worse, so long's you don't try and carry too much right away. Take a hot bath or something and go to bed early today."

"What's wrong? You stepped away the second it was over."

"Nothing."

"No way. Your ears are bright red!"

"Okay, but you don't have to point it out!" he argued, still looking away from her.

At that moment, the eye patch covering his right eye slipped out of place. He hurriedly readjusted it. He still wasn't used to wearing it, so he just couldn't find it comfortable.

"Ohhh, I'm sorry. I feel like I was making a ton of weird noises while you were doing all that stuff to me. You didn't get too excited, did you?"

"Not really. I'm not a kid; it's not like I react to every little thing or whatever."

"You know it's something for *adults* to react to, right?"

"You don't need to bring logic into this!" he snapped again, still averting his gaze.

"Ah-ha! Awww, you're so cute." The woman giggled like a child. "Willem, was it? You kind of act like you're all grown-up, but you're still young, right? How old are you?"

"Don't remember." That was the truth.

"It's only recently that you started working at Mr. Astartos's inn, right? I guess you were probably studying medicine in Collina di Luce?"

"I'm telling you, I don't remember." That was also the truth.

Collina di Luce was a huge city not too far from where they were. It had one of the richest histories in all of Regule Aire and a large population. Of course, there were several renowned schools of medicine in the city. And naturally, there were plenty of people who were studying to become medical professionals there. But when she brought up the possibility that he might be one of them, he got the feeling that wasn't quite it.

What he learned probably wasn't medicine or any sort of science like that. What his fingers remembered wasn't the knowledge for giving a nice massage but something else—something bloodier, muddier. He had a hard time explaining it, but that's what it was.

"Oooh, I feel so light! Now I'll definitely be able to fly around again tomorrow!"

She stood up and stretched.

"You were pretty stiff. Does your job tire you out that much?"

"I'm a delivery person for the post office. I have to carry really heavy stuff some days, y'know." She rolled her shoulders and added, "I'd hate to get too muscly, though."

"Don't push yourself. What I did now wasn't much more than some emergency measures. Don't take proper care of yourself, and you'll end up falling outta the sky again tomorrow."

"Ugh, that'd be awful... Wait, you're going already?"

"Yeah."

"You're so busy. Why don't you have some tea before you go?"

"Nah. I've got company waiting for me."

"Company...? Oh, that little girl." The tourterelle gave an odd-sounding chuckle. "Too bad I couldn't tempt you, but I suppose I can't just tell you to forget about her. Oh well."

"I'm glad you understand. See ya."

"Byeee! Say hello to Mr. Astartos and the little one for me, okay?"



Who am I? the young man thought.

His name was apparently Willem.

Apparently—in other words, that was just hearsay.

He couldn't remember his name—or anything about himself, for that matter.

Every time he tried to recall something from the past, his head erupted with a splitting pain.

Every time he tried to overcome the pain, Elq—another survivor of the same airship accident—for some reason, looked at him with distress. That was why he hesitated to try any more than that.

Everything he'd lost was already gone. He decided to value all he had in the present rather than be wed to the past and lose everything he had now.

And so he decided to begin a new life.



A brilliant sky hanging precariously with stars filled the clear night.

The cool, crisp air felt good on his flushed skin after finishing up another job.

"Haaah... Man, I'm real tired all of a sudden."

He was currently an employee at an inn. So of course, making house calls as a masseur wasn't in his original list of duties at work.

His mind still wouldn't reveal who he was in the past, but his fingers seemed to still remember plenty. At first, his chiropractic services were just for the inn's regulars, but word got out in the neighborhood, and lately, he was being requested by name to personally make house visits here and there, like with this most recent client.

Most of his clients were middle-aged semifer men. They found his service convenient because they were a race of people born with lots of muscle that greatly weakened from being out of shape or from old age. Oftentimes, older semifers pushed their muscles overboard thinking they were still young, injuring themselves and causing inflammation and such—those kinds of people were his regulars.

But sometimes, young women would call him over, like what had happened just now. And—

“You're sloppy, Willie.”

On the way home, Elq sounded cranky as she walked beside him.

“You always get so shy when it turns out to be a pretty grown-up lady.”

“No I don't,” he groaned in response.

“Cheater.”

“I told you, I don't. And it's not like I have a girlfriend anyway so I can't be cheating... I think.”

Now that he thought about it, he wasn't sure what his relationships with women had been like in the past, since he was now without his memory. It wasn't entirely impossible that there was someone out there he'd dedicated his heart to and ended up marrying.

...No, there couldn't be. He thought it over again.

Willem couldn't really imagine himself whispering sweet nothings into some girl's ear. Not only that, but he had a hard time thinking about himself entering a special relationship with a woman.

So he was sure he was single. And he shouldn't be criticized for getting shy around some people.

Then—

“Ah!”

Elq tripped on a rock, likely because the road was dark and she was looking up at the stars as she walked.

She fell forward, and just as she was about to lose her balance completely, he grabbed her by the scruff of her neck.

“Hey, be careful. The road's uneven around here.”

“O-okay...”

“Wanna hold my hand?”

“Huh? Um...but...”

She seemed somewhat hesitant. Regardless, he reached out and forcefully grabbed the girl's little hand.

It was cold.

And then he realized that there was too much of a height difference between them, and they wouldn't be able to keep walking like this.

"L-let go. I'm embarrassed."

"What? And you were just saying all sorts of naughty things like a grown-up!"

"That's because I'm not a chil— Wah!"

They couldn't walk holding hands. The road was too uneven to let her go. It was an irksome problem, but it wasn't like it was unsolvable. He lifted the girl's tiny body all at once and placed her behind his neck.

Basically, he had her ride on his shoulders.

"Wooooow..."

"Be careful—you'll get more than a scratch if you fall down."

"I'm so high up! I can see everything!"

She wasn't listening.

"I can almost reach the stars!"

She raised her hand up to the sky as far as she could manage.

There was no way she could ever reach them. But it almost seemed like she could. And so she stretched as far as she could.

Willem understood how she felt. He couldn't pinpoint a reason why, but he knew it well.

"Get a good grip on me. Doesn't matter if it's my hair or whatever, okay?"

"O-okay!"

He couldn't treat her any more like a child even if he tried. But she didn't complain about it.

"Hey, Elq," he called out toward his head. "You knew me before I lost my memory, right?"

He could feel her waver.

"...I didn't."

"Really? But..."

She seemed to know a lot about Willem for someone who didn't know him. Hang on—this girl was even the first person to tell him that his own name was *Willem*.

And...

"Well, you act awfully natural around me for someone who was supposedly a stranger. Although, that's actually been super helpful for me emotionally."

"It just...ended up this way, yeah."

Her response was obviously faltering.

She was clearly trying to hide something. But, well, he probably didn't need to press her any more.

"Carmy went off somewhere. I'm grown-up, but this is the first time my life's been my own, so I don't want to be alone."

"Carmy?"

"She's been taking care of me ever since I was born. There's Carmy and Ebo and Jay."

"Huh."

She brought up a lot of names; maybe they were some kind of servants who had served her family for generations.

Which would make this girl the esteemed young lady of a rather good home. Should she really be casually hanging out in a place like this? Wouldn't her family be running around in a frenzy right about now?

"Don't you need to go home?"

"No. I don't have one anymore." The outrageous claim seemed to come so easily to her. "I'm sure if I keep waiting, Carmy will find me. Then together, we're gonna look for Ebo."

"Huh."

Maybe they were going around visiting her old servants who were all scattered now. He wasn't really sure, but he hoped it went well.

"That's why it's only chance that I'm here with you now, Willie. I'm sure things will come to an end soon, so for now, this is just a dis...dissolute... relationship..."

She was using a word she didn't know well in the wrong way.

"That sure sounds grown-up of you."

"Right?"

He could feel her chuckling proudly to herself above him.

"—And there's one little thing to add to what we just talked about."

"Hmm?"

"Chtholly is me. But I'm not Chtholly."

—*What?*

"Ch...tholly?"

That was a name he didn't know.

One he didn't remember.

One that stirred his heart.

"That's why I'm not gonna fall in love with you, Willie. I think it's not fair at all— Willie?"

Elq realized something was off and tightly gripped his hair.

"What's wrong? Do you feel sick?"

"...Nah."

He forced the enormous feeling of nausea back down into his chest.

"It's nothing. Just got a little dizzy. I'm outta shape."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really."

It looked like his body was used to putting on a brave face when kids were around.

And it seemed it was trained to spout lies if it meant he could maintain the facade.

Despite his headache and nausea, Willem smiled naturally.

"All right, I'm gonna run home from here. Running's your first and best bet to get back into shape."

"What? Wait, wait a second, I'll get down, then."

"Not lettin' you! You've gotta keep a real good grip on me so you don't end up falling off!"

"What? Wh-wh-what?"

He disregarded her baffled noises of alarm.

And just as he said he would, Willem dashed off along the nighttime road.

"Ah, ahhh, ahhhhhh!"

Of course, Elq ended up bouncing violently atop his shoulders. Her little hands had a tight grip on Willem's black hair. It did hurt a little.

Of course, that kind of pain was actually very welcome to him. It warmed his heart much more than unreasonable headaches.

"You better stay quiet, or you'll bite your tongue!"

"O-okay, but then, you sh-should let me d— Ahhhhhhowww!"

Told you so.

"...Hey, Elq."

"Wh-wha...?"

"You know I do love you, right?"

"....."

For some reason, there was a long silence. And then—

"You're treating me like a kid again," she said, her tone reproachful.

"Ha-ha, guess you found me out."

"Of course I would."

She wrapped her arms tightly around the back of his head.

"You'd never say something like that and mean it, Willie. Chtholly, and I guess even Lillia, worked so hard for it."

Zing. His head hurt again.

And for some reason, even his chest hurt this time.

Elq Hrqstn was—apparently—dead.

She was originally an immortal being, but something had been plastered over that, labeling her as a "dead" thing instead. Both this world and the Visitors' physical bodies were convinced by the label. The world treated her as a corpse, and her body itself acted like a corpse. If everyone thought it was a corpse, then it was a corpse... At least, that was the sort of logic with which the label overwrote reality.

Not too long ago, Nils's own hands put a tiny scratch onto that label.

The label lost a bit of its persuasive power from the scratch. And for the miniscule amount of persuasiveness that had been lost, her body took a tiny step away from being a corpse. She changed into a strange being that was infinitely close to a real corpse yet with a body that was just ever so slightly immortal. Apparently.

Willem didn't really understand the logic, but he probably didn't need to anyway.

What was important now was that the girl's body was certainly almost identical to that of a dead person. And on top of that, she was just ever so

slightly alive. She was childishly acting like an adult, living her day-to-day life in joy.

And maybe, somehow—

Unlike he, who'd lost his past, this girl had a place to go. People to meet. Things to do. And yet, she hid all of that and was staying here.

He knew why. She was worried about this "Willem" and couldn't leave him alone.



Boar meat simmered gently in the pot.

Tempted by the delicious smell, he almost wanted to reach out and take some for himself. But Astartos's gaze was keeping him in check. If he wanted to have meat at its most delicious, then he couldn't disobey a troll's instructions. Willem knew that.

But of course, as always, he had no idea why he knew that so well. He thought of his own past as full of mysteries, like it belonged to someone else.

Astartos the innkeeper was a troll.

Trolls were an ogre race and had a frightening racial custom of treating others very well then eating them. But now, in the present, since killing intelligent life was restricted by law, they could no longer carry out their customs as they once had. Now, with no other choice, they just fulfilled their instinctual urge to treat others well, and that was why he was running an inn...or so he said.

"Many trolls choose to live this sort of lifestyle. There are some communities here and there, but only about half the race live in them; the other half lead similar lives all over the place," Astartos explained, gazing rather softly down at the meat in the pot. "I have a grown daughter who took a job taking care of small children on a different island. I know I'm her father, but I really do think she's a kind girl, so it must be a dream job for her."

"Huh," Willem responded noncommittally, but then a thought suddenly came to him. "If you have an adult daughter, then how old are you?"

"I just reached fifty not too long ago."

"...You don't look it," he murmured and looked back up at Astartos's face.

His face looked like one with an indiscernible age to him. He had plenty of gray hairs, and there were wrinkles carved throughout his cheeks, but Willem didn't get the impression that he was *old*. But then, he didn't exactly look young, either. The shape of his face was hard to pinpoint—one where he could be told the man was any age, and it still wouldn't sound right.

"That's how trolls are as a people. It's not like we don't age, but it doesn't stand out too much. Oh, the meat should be good to go now."

"You have no idea how jealous I am," he responded half-heartedly as he took a piece of meat from the pot and tossed it in his mouth. "...This is delicious."

"Heh-heh, isn't it?"

Astartos beamed.

"Ah, hah, *ih hah*..."

Elq's eyes went wide in surprise, so Willem got the water pitcher for her.

"Don't force yourself if you've got a sensitive tongue," he said.

"I thought it'd be okay..." She puffed her cheeks, eyes watering. She was at the age where she wanted to act older, and she was not straightforward at all.

"Oh right, so have you gotten used to life here now?" Astartos suddenly changed the subject. "We're close to Collina di Luce, and we're along a major highway. People of all sorts come and go. I don't think it's putting featureless like you out, is it?"

"Not at all." He gave a soft, bitter smile. "I have to thank you. I might be too comfortable here—I almost want to stay forever."

"I wouldn't mind one bit. I know at first we talked about you staying here until Mr. Nils came back, but you're welcome to stay for longer after, too."

"...Y'know."

"Yes?"

"If this was a classic amnesia story, then that'd be something a nice girl my age who's been living alone would say to me."

"Ha-ha, I could say the exact same to you. You've wandered your way here into the home of a man who lives alone, but why aren't you a nice young woman?"

Indeed. Now that he mentioned it, he was right. Their ideas were totally at odds.

"I feel like I'm being ignored." The girl much younger than either of them was getting into a little huff.

"Well, fiction aside, we'll take you up on your kindness for now. Yeah?" he responded as he placed some carrots on Elq's plate.

She made a little pouty frown. It seemed she didn't like them.

"Don't be picky. Otherwise, you'll never grow up," he said and realized something. Now that he thought about it, he'd been told this girl was (somehow) practically immortal. So no matter what or how much she ate, she might not have a future where she grew physically bigger. And why was she eating stuff anyway?

"Ooooh..."

Tears pooling at the edges of her eyes, Elq took a whole bunch of carrots and threw them into her mouth.

She chewed them into pieces then swallowed. They must've caught in her throat, since she took the pitcher of water and gulped it down. Her eyes were in a haze as she pounded on her chest.

After a brief moment, she grinned.

Neither of them responded, so she looked into Willem's eyes and grinned again.

"Good, attagirl." He tossed her the first compliment that came to mind.

"Yeah!"

She beamed.

And who was it insisting all the time that she didn't want to be treated like a child?

He closed his eyes and made a little wish.

He hoped that these peaceful days, calm days—though it was uncomfortable how much they felt somehow like a sham—would continue, even for just a little while longer.



Even Now, in This World
Fading to Dusk
-everything in my hands-

Even Now, in This World Fading to Dusk

-everything in my hands-

1. The Faeries of Collina di Luce

She had her whole body examined; they put a light right next to her eyes to see how they were working, they made her take medicine for the exam and asked how she was feeling, and they took just a little bit of blood from her.

"Oooh, I don't think I can be married off anymore after having my body prodded like that..."

With nothing but a single hospital gown covering her bare skin, Ithea slowly sat up on the examination table.

"That aside, this means the checkup's over, yeah?"

No response.

The cyclops doctor peered at her chart, his expression stiff.

It was typically hard to read the expressions of races who had differing facial structures, but there were times where they were obvious and came across fine.

"...You've really been putting up a fight," was all he said, as though the words were being squeezed out of him.

"Nya-ha-ha, all I've got is a reputation for being tough, that's for sure."

She brushed it off with her usual fake smile as she did up the buttons on the gown.

"Your life force is withering. Your body is forgetting how to live. If you get injured, I don't think you'll recover anymore. You won't be able to gain back any of the strength you use up when activating your venenum."

"Yep, yep, that's what I thought."

She responded with as bright a voice as she could muster in response to the cyclops's grave tone.

"I'm not sure if you'll be able to come home the next time you go off to fight."

"Yeah. Y'know, I'm almost relieved that it's finally my turn." She swung her legs back and forth as she sat on the exam table. "Honestly, I've lived for way too long. I've been really struggling lately. There are so many other girls I hope will survive, but then they go die off one by one. Yet, here's li'l ol' me and my worthless life still hanging on ages later."

"There's no such thing as a life not worth living."

"Well...sure. But we're not alive to begin with."

"That's not what I meant—"

"I think maybe you oughtta leave it at that, Doc. It'd be a real disgrace for you to start empathizing with disposable tools."

"It is true there are plenty of people who think that way, but none of them know who you are personally—none of them know that faeries have a sense of self. We couldn't call you—"

"You have to send us into the jaws of death in order to keep Regule Aire safe." She cut him off. "That's why they don't recognize us as our own race. They treat us like weapons without any rights. That's so all the people directly involved can use us up like we're meant to without any hemming and hawing. They need that rule, and so that's how it is. Right?"

"Right," he said with a stern voice and a heavy sigh. "I'll acknowledge that much. But more than that, we are still individually free to think how we want."

"If there are too many adults who spoil us, we might end up saying things like, *'I don't wanna die, so I'm not gonna fight.'*"

"...You're right."

The cyclops curtly averted his gaze.

"Hmm? That's awfully shift of you. Are you hiding something?"

"It's not really something worth hiding, no. But let's suppose—and this is purely supposition—what if none of you had to fight any longer and you could live out your life. What would you want to do?"

"Huh. Well, that sure came outta nowhere."

She thought for a moment.

"Well, if we're just speaking in hypotheticals, then I guess I'd wanna stay as I have been this whole time."

"And how's that?"

"Spend my time lazing and idling around in the warehouse in the forest. Just watching the kiddies playing and making a ruckus while our childish mom figure chases after them as I read a book. Super-peaceful days that stretch out my life span."

"...Ha-ha. I see, then. I see." He nodded a few times before adding, as though totally disregarding their entire conversation, "I think you are meant to live a long life after all."



Lakhesh's physical tweaks were finished.

Each doctor individually praised her for producing such great numbers, for possessing such superb qualities. And every single time she heard one of those compliments, Nygglotho's mood sank. No matter how well a blade could cut, no matter how effective a bomb was, none of those praises were going to make a little girl happy.

She hoped there would never, ever be a chance in the future for Lakhesh to use her talents. She didn't want the chance to come. She would fight it off.

“Whoooooooooooooooo!”

“Wooooooooooooow...”

Tiat and Lakhesh stood side by side, squealing in excitement.

This was Barley Square—one of the most notable landmarks in all of Collina di Luce. Just as its name suggested, it was originally a wholesale market that dealt purely in barley. Its job as a marketplace was finished when they built a different one near the aire-port, and now it was just a multipurpose plaza.

Artists were putting on a diverse array of performances all over the square. There was a ballman acrobat juggling countless knives, a frogger magician breathing out thin streams of fire, and a band in matching masks playing upbeat music to liven up the atmosphere.

“Wow, wow, wow!”

A freed child’s curiosity knew no bounds. Tiat ran left and right, from crowd to crowd. She dragged Lakhesh along by the hand, who hollered as she followed.

“H-hey, stop running around so much! Did you forget you’re supposed to be watched?!”

According to The Winged Guard’s weapons management procedures, the minimum requirement for taking the leprechauns out on an excursion was an accompanying ranked officer. And so the poor fourth officer, forced to act as their chaperone, chased the two, yelling after them.

Nygglotho felt conflicted as she watched on.

“...If only we’d come just for sightseeing.”

She knew the wish was outrageous. These girls were here to be ready for battle, and it was a battle they shouldn’t have been involved in at all in the first place. That was why they were being granted such selfish requests as sightseeing, which were typically unthinkable.

Speaking of selfishness—there was Nephren.

She couldn’t be dead from the way she looked. But at the same time, she couldn’t be 100 percent in good health, either. She’d undergone a different sort of change than what Chtholly had experienced and probably would never return to the faerie warehouse.

Nygglotho would miss her.

But it wasn’t a sad story. The sky was endless, and the world was small. Believing that Nephren was out there somewhere, happy and healthy, was more than good enough for her. She couldn’t even wish the same for the ones who’d already passed, after all.

“Heeey, Nygglotho! Over here, over heeere! Look, they’re doing an arm-wrestling contest! You should join with the old man!”

There was Tiat, waving her arm around. The fourth officer who she’d called “*the old man*,” who had a smile containing mixed feelings on his face, was getting into it and rolling up his sleeves. Lakhesh was incessantly bowing her head in apology.

That was rather optimistic of them to invite her without knowing how she felt. How wonderful.

"...Sure thing!" She waved back at Tiat. "The contest won't last for long once I join in!" she called as she jogged toward the children.



Everything was worth asking for.

After being asked whether or not they'd be able to get into the Great Central Library, anticipating a "no" for an answer, the mayor's daughter, Phyracorlybia—or Phyr, as she told them to call her—gave a very enthusiastic "Understood!" in return. And then, not even half a day later, she picked up some library passes, of all things, for them.

Rhantolk, the very one who asked for it, was the one most surprised of them all.

They were faeries raised in the countryside and had no rights whatsoever. And Collina di Luce's Great Central Library, on the other end of the spectrum, represented the whole of Regule Aire's collective wisdom. It was of a vastly different class and so awe-inspiring that they felt out of place, like they would be punished for simply approaching it.

The library pass was handed to her in an envelope, and it somehow looked like a terrifying lethal weapon.

Underneath several grandiose stamps, there was some mysterious sorcery written that said, *THIS PASS GRANTS THE HOLDER ACCESS TO NO FURTHER THAN CONFIDENTIAL VAULT B-47*. What was this B-47? Was it full of secrets beyond that point that they'd be disappeared if they found out?

"...You sure think up some crazy stuff, too, Rhan," Ithea muttered matter-of-factly. She'd also received the same library pass.

"Don't remind me. I'm about to be crushed under the weight of my realization."

"The two of us are pretty lower-middle-class, huh?"

"I believe that everyone values their own standing."

They quietly exchanged words of inferiority.

"All right, then, let us be off! I will do my best to help you research in any way I can!"

Phyr was the only excited person in their party, and she started to walk off briskly.

"I cannot help you at all when it comes to your real battles. Oh, no, it would probably be an insult to all the faeries if I even tried. So please, allow me to do what little I can while I have the chance!"

A bright-red flame was burning in her eyes.

"She sure is a handful once you flip the switch, huh...?"

"Was she like this last time?"

"The officer handled it."

That guy again? Why was it that whenever he got involved, everyone felt the need to be such obvious handfuls with their true personalities?

A battle with a great army of books commenced.

She thought her brain was going to boil over.

She loved reading. She didn't hate thinking. But everything had a limit. And Rhantolk's head, stuffed with information beyond its capacity, was overheating.

"Why don't we step outside for a moment and rest as we compile our notes?" she offered.

"Ahhh, sorry, I'm gonna try and get a little further in this book. Why don't you head out first?"

"I will assist Miss Ithea, so please go ahead, Miss Rhantolk. Oh, there's a café in the rear of the library that serves a delicious pudding—why don't you wait there, and we'll meet up with you afterward?"

The deceptively tough duo said that to her.

"Wait, we can't act separately, can we? We're faeries, you know." She glanced at the uniformed chaperone who stood beside them, who had completely transformed into a mere ornament.

"I've received orders from the first officer to allow you to roam about as freely as possible. But do not go too far."

Surprisingly, she was given the go-ahead.

She had her doubts, but if he said it was fine, then she wasn't going to try and press the issue.

"...I see. Then, if you say so, I shall do just that."

She nodded dutifully, took her note-filled notebook, and stood from her seat.

She found the café Phyr had recommended to her relatively quickly.

There weren't a lot of people inside, probably because it wasn't on the main street. The majority of the customers didn't seem to be tourists, either, but rather locals; that meant this little spot had its own pool of regulars.

She took a seat on the open terrace. There were a lot of things that stood out on the menu, but the milk tea and slice of apple pie drew her eye the most, so that's what she ordered.

She opened her notebook then stared down again at the scribbled passages she'd copied from the books she read.

"Hmm..."

What were they—what were leprechauns—to begin with? Why did they exist? Where did they come from; where did they go? That was the original problem Ithea had posed to her at the faerie warehouse the other day.

Just those questions on their own sounded like the worries of adolescence.

And even more troubling was that, from an objective perspective, they were adolescent children.

Children from other races would collect answers from philosophy or fiction books. But all the books they were reading through were none other

than research documents on necromancy. On top of that, they were the highest-level material anyone could hope to find on the island cluster.

"We sure are a questionable bunch, aren't we...?" she muttered and then remembered she was all alone.

It always felt like Nopht was right next to her, perhaps because they had spent so much time together. Nopht wasn't the type to think very hard about things, nor was she too quick to catch on, but she was very good at listening. She could draw the words out of Rhantolk, even when Rhantolk was in the middle of a thought. And so that's how she ended up with the tendency to talk to herself.

This is not a good habit, she thought. Even though she was aiming to be an entirely independent woman, it didn't seem to be going very well.

"Perhaps I'm at the stage where everything I try winds up fruitless in the end..."

She took a bite out of the apple pie. *Delicious.*

Then—there was a strong gust of wind. It snatched several of her notes from her hand, and they swirled up into the sky.

"Ah..."

Flustered, she put out her hand but couldn't reach. The moment she stood from her chair to reach even higher, another gust of wind blew all the rest of her notes away.

"Ahhh! Oh nooo!"

She stared blankly up at the sky, lamenting her carelessness.

Should she rush to kindle some venenum and chase after them? No, she wouldn't make it in time. Should she run after them on foot? No, she couldn't keep up like that, and she had a feeling that would simply cause even more mistakes. Then, what should she do? What could she do?

Time was ticking, even as she waffled. As she watched, her notes flew high, ever so higher—

"...What?"

—but not *that* high. All her notes froze in midair, as though that exact moment had been cut out of the flow of time.

"This..."

A second later, they started moving again. This time, they ignored the wind and were being sucked in toward the hands of a man standing in the middle of the street, like they were attached to a string.

There was an old man with a stern face, wearing a white cape that stood out like a sore thumb.

"Wh-whaaat?! Mister?!"

"Oh, you're the girl from the other day! What a surprise!"

There wasn't a hint of surprise on the passing old man's face as he approached, her notes in his hands.

"You've come all this way to concentrate on studying, I see. Everything you learn when you're young becomes a weapon for you to wield in the

future. But of course, sometimes there's not much meaning if you don't learn by putting together the way you... Hmm?"

The old man's gaze suddenly dropped to the bundle of notes, and he furrowed his brow.

"Thank you. Those notes are very important to me."

"Mm, high-level necromancy? You sure picked an eccentric topic for your self-study, didn't you?"

"No, I'm not exactly a student, and what I'm doing isn't as commendable as studying. I have no intentions of preparing for the future; it's something I simply wanted to learn about."

"What did you say?"

She took back the notes the old man handed to her.

"...Yes, the color of your hair. You're a leprechaun, too."

"Oh—"

In a flash, a whole mixture of feelings blended in Rhantolk's head.

Not everyone who knew of the leprechaun race had a very good impression of them. She steeled herself, afraid of what sort of expression would appear on the old man's face in the next moment.

"I see now. The other young lady with you was your manager. It slipped my mind. I told myself long ago that I'd never see you in person. Who would've thought we'd meet like this and even go as far as engaging in conversation?"

This was a surprise. What did this all mean?

There was a faint yet recognizable twist of grief on the old man's face. It wasn't hatred or hesitation that exuded from his expression but regret.

"Erm. I'm sorry, mister, are you all right?"

Even she thought it was a stupid question. If he wasn't okay, then it couldn't be anything but her fault. She wasn't in the position to offer him consoling words with a kind expression.

"...Ha-ha. Are you concerned for me? What a kind girl you are."

"Uh..."

He praised her, for some reason.

Ever since she'd first met him, it almost felt like her own train of thought and everything he said never quite matched up. It was vexing, like a key gear that just kept on turning, even though it wasn't meshing with anything.

"Well, we cannot help what has already come to pass. Coincidences are coincidences, and whether or not they bring good or bad luck solely depends on how we make do with the situation."

"Uh..."

What was this man talking about?

The old man pulled out a chair before the baffled Rhantolk and sat opposite her. His large stature didn't quite match the smaller café chairs.

"There must be something you want to learn from the knowledge pool of necromancy. Go ahead and ask me. I'll answer."

"Er, what we're trying to learn is a little complicated..."

"I don't doubt it, but no matter. Ask away."

Nonsense.

He'd known she was researching necromancy with just a glance at her notes. At this point in time, she could reasonably guess that this old man knew many things. But what she and the others wanted to know wasn't something that should be in the information banks of a knowledgeable old man like him.

"...What are leprechauns in the first place?"

Still, there was no harm in asking.

She felt like she was daring him to answer if he could.

"I see. A query that gets right to the heart of things, doesn't it? Well done." He nodded, pleased for some reason. "Well then, where should I start?"

He thought for a moment.

"A long, long time ago, the Visitors ordered the Poteau to create the emnetwiht race."

"What?"

It sounded like he was suddenly starting from an unrelated thread.

The old man continued, ignoring Rhantolk's confusion.

"They didn't create them out of thin air, no. They prepared and processed material to make them. These materials were essentially of two parts: the first being the sole species that existed on this world when the Visitors came—the Primitive Beasts—and the other being the Visitors' own souls, as the Visitors had grown weary of living life as wanderers. And the way they processed these"—he pointed to Rhantolk's half-eaten apple pie—"was no different from that right there. They shattered their souls into teeny-tiny pieces and kneaded them into the Primitive Beasts. It was a large-scale enchantment, one that forcibly overwrote the Beasts' physical appearances from the soul outward. The things that were once the Primitive Beasts were transformed into completely different beings that looked just like the Visitors, and that was how the emnetwiht came to be."

"Uh... Wait, but, um?"

That didn't match up with what was commonly accepted as the creation myth. It was such an exaggerated story that Rhantolk had a hard time buying it. It didn't even answer her question anyway. She was all around unsure what she should roll her eyes at first.

But there was just one thing in there that caught her attention.

The Visitors had used these Primitive Beasts in order to create the emnetwiht from them.

"But, well, the emnetwiht race ended up multiplying too much. There was more pie, but unfortunately, there wasn't enough crust. The amount of crust—the Visitors' souls—stayed consistently the same ever since the moment they were shattered. The crust grew thinner and thinner as the days went on."

"...And don't tell me that the Beasts were freed from inside them...?"

That was the surface of a tentative theory she'd reached just the other day. But her idea was nothing more than one possible conclusion she first stumbled onto when she was reading that ancient text they'd happened to find. This old man, who shouldn't have had the same opportunity as she did, was, for some reason, expressing the exact same thing.

"Indeed. You're sharp. Don't tell me you've already put it together?"

The old man was impressed. He briefly glanced over the notes on the table.

"The Primitive Beasts were originally immortal and indestructible beings. And by being sealed within the mortal husks that were the emnetwiht, they changed. Remorse. Hope. Interdependence. Justice. Kindness. Fear. Apathy. Ignorance... Influenced by the many factors that lured people to death, the Seventeen Beasts turned into beings that symbolized death.

"Once these things were free, the emnetwiht race would perish. The emnetwiht knew this and devised a plan. As luck would have it, there were two Visitors still alive at the time."

The Visitors—indeed, their legend was still spoken of today.

They say that a little over five hundred scant years ago, the emnetwiht Braves struck down the last Visitor.

"Yes. There were those who wanted to use the Visitors' souls to make a new piecrust. But they failed in their attempt. Emnetwiht technology could not replicate the Poteaus' deed. They were unable to shatter the Visitors' souls as they wanted; they simply cracked into many pieces and scattered with the wind. They were unable to bake a new apple pie, and so came the inevitable end. Well, I left out a lot, but that's the general order of events."

"...Um." Rhantolk slowly raised her hand. "This was all very intriguing, but that was a story about what the emnetwiht were, right? My question was what the leprechauns are."

"Yes, of course. I believe I answered your question."

The two of them were operating on two seriously different wavelengths.

But even so, the conversation itself should hold water in some shape or form. She just needed to approach what the old man said as if she was deciphering a complicated ancient text. Then, she should be able to understand what he meant. With that in mind, she thought over the story again—

"...No."

—and put two and two together.

The soul of the last Visitor didn't shatter very nice and properly.

Their ingredient of soul fragments scattered to the wind, and they were unable to bake a new apple pie.

"The failed generation of emnetwiht that the emnetwiht themselves were never able to perfect... That's who we really are, isn't it?"

"Mm. Your understanding itself is not wrong." The old man nodded. "But I think it's a little hasty to describe yourselves as '*failed*.' Although, I

suppose everyone's interpretation will be different—perceive it as you will, be it optimistically or pessimistically.”

It was neither. There was something more important than that.

If what this old man said was the truth, then all the things that had been considered mysteries of Regule Aire would be solved in an instant. That couldn't be right, and it had to be impossible, yet, for some reason, it sounded like it was true.

“Why do you know all this?”

“I've lived a little while, you see,” he answered lightly, shrugging.

“If what you just said was true, then that shouldn't be something *anyone* alive on this earth should know. Why did you tell that to me, of all people?”

“Because I am indebted to you,” he said, a hint of sadness in his smile. “I cannot apologize or go back. I have no right. I suppose this is the least I can do; it's nothing more than a little self-indulgence for a cowardly and selfish old man.”

The old man stood, marking the end of the conversation.

“I doubt we'll be seeing each other again, but this was a precious time.”

“Wai—”

She hurriedly got to her feet, trying to stop him.

At that moment, the wind blew. She thought her notes might fly off again, so she frantically shut her notebook.

By the time she looked up once more, she didn't spot the old man anywhere.

“Phewww... I'm poooooped!”

Just like a student on her way home from school, Ithea staggered over, her eyes unfocused from exhaustion. Just behind her was Phyr the lycanthrope, her fur covering the complexion on her face.

“Whoa, what's up with you, Rhan? You're spacin' out.”

“...Who are we? Why do we exist? Where do we come from; where do we go?”

“Rhan?”

“Once you hear the real answer...it leaves you feeling surprisingly empty, doesn't it...?”

“Rhan? Hellooooo? Earth to Miss Rhantoolk?”

Ithea waved her hand in front of Rhantolk's face.

The fork, sitting on the plate along with the half-eaten apple pie, made a small *clink*.

2. The Brave and the Visitor

Elq suddenly collapsed.

She passed out on the spot as they were cleaning the guest rooms, like a puppet whose strings had suddenly snapped.

“You okay?!”

Willem frantically held her up. She was cold. She was barely breathing. She felt like a corpse, and he realized that wasn't just a metaphor. She *was*

a corpse, and the fact that she'd been walking around like a living being was the true anomaly.

If she were alive, she would have a fever, or her breathing would be labored; there would be many other things that could be checked to see how sick she was. But Elq was a corpse, so he had no idea how he should judge the situation. He couldn't even begin to guess how he could treat her. He didn't think calling a doctor would help at all. He had no idea what he should do for her or what he could do for her.

He took her to her bed and laid her down for the time being. He wasn't sure if it would make much difference.

He felt like a very similar thing happened long ago—or maybe it was just recently. He laid someone who would not wake up on the bed and could do nothing but shiver powerlessly beside them. When he couldn't bear it anymore in the end, he stood, believing there had to be something he could do and went off to go beat someone up.

Ah, crap. If he could tell there was even the slightest possibility that beating someone up right now would change anything, he would've done it without a second thought. But it was only times like these that he came up empty on the list of things he could pummel his clenched fist into.

"I need a wet towel... Wait, is there any point in cooling her off? What about warming her up instead...? Is she gonna rot?"

He stood once he thought of something but then immediately sat back down. He'd been doing that over and over for a while now.

Astartos said to him, "Don't worry about work. Just stay with her." But staying by her side when he couldn't do anything to help just made it even more painful.

Maybe he should get back to work. No, wait, he didn't want to leave her. Torn between his two choices, he stared hard at his palm.

"Ngh..."

Willem heard a groan, and his head snapped up.

"Hmm...?"

He leaned over her and peered at the girl.

He somehow felt like there was more color back in her face. She didn't seem to be in pain. Knowing there was no problem for the time being, the tension dissipated from Willem's expression.

"Hey." He forced all the muscles in his face to make a smile before she could see how sloppily his face had relaxed. "You're finally up, you lazy princess."

"I... Huh? I fell asleep? But what about cleaning?"

"You suddenly collapsed while you were cleaning. I was worried."

"Worried...?"

"You got super cold just now."

"Really?"

Elq tilted her head slightly as she placed her own palm on her forehead. It didn't seem like she could tell. But of course—she wouldn't be able to differentiate her own temperature by herself.

Willem placed his hand on her forehead in turn.

"You're warm," she said.

"No, you're just cold. Usually, if you were overworked or strained, it'd be the opposite. You'd get a fever. Your body's not normal, so I had no idea how to treat you. I thought you might not ever wake up again, so I was real worked up."

"Oh, sorry..."

"Right, have a good think about it. So you doing okay now?"

"Mm-hmm. I was just a little tired. I feel better after sleeping."

When he heard her say that, he felt his whole body relax. He still had a few questions, like if she should be calling what just happened "*sleeping*," but he didn't have the energy left to push the subject.

"I see... Is there anything you wanna drink? Or eat, for that matter? Should I go cut up an apple for you?" he asked gently. Elq gave him a blank stare.

"Warm...milk. Some that's...just a little sweet."

"All right, I'll get some for you."

He stood right up.

"You're really nice today, Willie."

"I'm always a nice guy."

For some reason, when he responded like that, he made her burst out laughing.

"I'm back now."

A sweet scent wafted from inside the pot Willem brought over.

He'd mixed a squeeze of honey in with the warmed milk, and there was just a dash of cinnamon powder to top it off.

"I cooled it a little bit, but don't try and drink it all at once, okay?"

"But I'm fine." Elq pouted slightly as she took a sip, then loudly gulped it down. "It's yummy."

"Right? I've got a good grasp of your tastes now."

"Hmph."

She frowned a little at him, probably because she took that to mean she had the taste of a little kid. But either because she knew that's what she liked anyway or that there was irrefutable evidence in her hand, she didn't object.

"...Um, can I ask you something?"

"Hmm?" Willem looked up to her as he filled the empty cup from the pot. "What is it?"

"It's an *if*. Just if."

"You sure are acting self-important. Just say it."

"If—if I were to die in five days, would you be nicer to me?"

"Huh?"

He furrowed his brow.

It felt like he'd heard those words somewhere before. But more importantly, what was it she meant by saying that?

"What are you talking about? Five days? That's real specific. What's happening then?"

Elq looked like she realized her mistake.

"Huh? Oh, n-no, there's nothing...at all. I'm sorry—forget about it."

She pressed her palm hard against her chest, right where her deep cut was.

"Wait, hey, Elq? Don't tell me—"

"I...shouldn't have asked. I wondered if I was going to end up the same as Chtholly, so I tried something I shouldn't have."

—Ow.

There was a sudden sharp pain deep in his temples.

One of his memories had almost surfaced.

"I'm really sorry. Just let me rest a little more now."

Elq hugged the blanket and turned away from him.

"Got it. I'll leave the milk pan here, so serve yourself seconds when you want."

Willem left Elq's room, nursing a slight headache.

Willem and Elq's room was a vacant refurbished space in a corner of the second floor of the inn.

He headed down the stairs, the steps creaking loudly as he went.

Since the inn was usually without any guests, they typically used the big lounge on the first floor as a little restaurant where one could enjoy light food and drink. He could see Astartos sitting at a small, round table in the middle of the lounge, sipping from a modest flask.

"I heard you talking. Is she awake?"

"Yeah. Sounded like she was a little tired and fell asleep."

"Well, that's good."

A genial smile crossed Astartos's face, and he nodded several times.

"—Wait, I thought you said you couldn't drink alcohol? You said 'no' to those drunk customers trying to offer you some before. Was that just an excuse?"

"Well no, not entirely." He smiled sheepishly. "I just can't exactly handle my liquor. I hear that once I start drinking, I become bolder, because apparently, I'll go off the rails at the smallest thing. I myself don't remember any of it, though."

"Yeah... That's pretty bad."

"My wife and daughter always got mad at me because it was such a hassle to quiet me down. That's why I avoid drinking as much as I can. This is all I'm having today."

"Ah, that's a shame. Guess I won't be partaking this time."

Willem shrugged in a comedic manner, and Astartos smiled and apologized honestly.

"I'm kinda thirsty, by the way. Guess I'll have some tea instead. You want some?"

"Yes. Now *that* I can partake in."

He sure was a cheeky fellow. Smirking, Willem went into the kitchen, scooped some water from the jar into the pot, and lit the crystal stove.

"By the way, about Mr. Nils..."

"Hmm?"

"He had a very kind look in his eyes the day he brought you two here. As he told me to take care of you, he also said, '*I hope they'll lead normal lives this time around.*'"

"...I see."

He could sort of imagine it. Even though they'd conversed for only a short time, he could strangely still understand what kind of man he was.

"Neither you nor Elq have normal bodies. And it doesn't seem like either of you was born with one... Oh, I'm very confident when it comes to judging flesh. I am a troll, after all."

He didn't need to sound so proud of it.

"Both of you have probably led such eventful lives, ones where you've put yourselves on the line and come within a hairbreadth of death, and this must be after the end. Both your body and heart are tired. What Mr. Nils said probably meant...if you could lead a different life after all that, then that's what he's hoping for you."

"Oh, so he puts on his teacher face when I'm not looking?"

"Hmm?"

"Nothing."

Willem wasn't sure what that self-proclaimed master really was to him, but he could tell that the man cherished both him and Elq. And so he was sure that Astartos's theory was right...or so he guessed.

"I appreciate the thought, but I can't believe he'd say that where I—"

There was a prickly, burning sensation on the back of his neck.

"—Hmm?"

Did a bug land on him? No, that wasn't it.

He didn't remember this sensation that clung to his skin. But his body knew it.

"Is anyone staying tonight?"

"Did something happen all of a sudden? Tonight? No, no one's staying tonight."

"You ever make a lot of enemies?"

"I...don't really remember ever giving anyone cause to come after me, no."

His answer made Willem a little nervous, but he'd take it at face value for the time being.

"Then, I guess that makes this a group robbery or somethin' like that."

A number of hostiles were spread out, surrounding the inn.

This was a good target. The inn was aimed at travelers passing down the highway, and it was just a little out of the way. Its larger construction and tidy appearance suggested that it had a fair amount of assets. And to a broke bandit, all the alcohol and food they had in storage must have been very attractive.

"Oh? I can't believe it's that time of year already."

"I don't think it has anything to do with the time of year. And why are you so calm anyway?"

"These sort of folk start popping up more once spring rolls around."

Come on, these aren't household bugs. You know that, right?

"I don't mind if you stay here with your tea, Willem. I'll handle them."

"No, I'm your employee, so I can't let you do that. I'll do it, so you drink your...not-alcohol... You're done with that already—I'll pour you a cup of tea, so you sit here, boss."

"There's no need to worry. I'm used to this."

"That's not a good enough reason—and wait, you shouldn't be used to this in the first place."

Willem stood.

Memories of his past were sealed shut, as they always were. But he didn't feel any fear or tension in this situation. He instead almost felt nostalgic, like he'd come back to an old, familiar haunt. His previous self must have lived in a frightening world.

"I really am all right, though."

"Just stay there."

He cracked his knuckles.

The most important thing when it came to silently overwhelming someone was getting a grasp on their breathing. It didn't matter if the goal was knocking them out or using a knife to off them.

As long as there was still air in their lungs, they could make noise just by exhaling. And even if he managed to render them unconscious with a single blow, there was still a chance of them making a sound when they hit the ground. Hence, any assassin with a certain degree of training would be practicing the skill to pinpoint others' breathing almost every day.

"...Maybe *I* was an assassin with a certain degree of training..."

He silently crept closer in the darkness, waiting for his target to completely exhale.

He pressed his thumb against his target's neck, shook his head, and quietly robbed him of consciousness.

Willem so skillfully succeeded in his attack that he gave himself chills.

He again studied his unconscious target in his arms. First, he was wrong about him being a broke bandit. The semifer wore a military uniform. He carried in his hands a rifle with a long barrel. It was at least clear that these weren't clothes that regular crooks liked to wear, nor was that a weapon any old crook could get their hands on.

"This uniform... Is this The Winged Guard's?"

He couldn't see the color or form of it very well in the darkness.

But for some reason, that's the hunch he got.

"But why's The Winged Guard got our inn surrounded?"

The first thing that came to mind was the possibility that a dangerous individual was staying here. But that couldn't be the case—there were no guests staying at the inn in the first place.

The next thing that came to mind was the possibility that Astartos was actually being pursued by the military... Personality-wise, that was hard to imagine, and yet, he could still somehow believe such a strange theory. In the end, though, he didn't feel like that was right. It was every city's and island's respective vigilance organization's role to chase after criminals. The Winged Guard was an organization that stood up to the dangers that threatened all of Regule Aire; they lacked the authority to search for and apprehend any offenders.

And then, there was another theory:

"Is it...me?"

Just as that question came to mind, the shutters opened, and the lanterns flickered on, catching Willem on the spot.

"Freeze!"

He wasn't sure how or when it happened, but he found himself staring down the barrels of countless guns. He was impressed—the protectors of Regule Aire sure were skilled.

Even now, with devices that could snatch his life away in a moment thrust in his face, Willem's heart was still calm. He felt no fear or menace.

"What's an organization like you guys need from our inn? Food? A place to stay?"

"I said freeze!"

"Couldja just keep it down a notch? We don't wanna bother the guests upstairs."

Not that there actually were any guests upstairs, of course.

"Target acquired. Will proceed with incapacitation. Requesting permission to engage."

"Granted. Attack!"

At the signal, all the figures in the darkness sprang into action at once.

Willem decided to leave the reinforcements for later. Instead, he quickly counted the six people he should be fighting. Going up against guns in the darkness was going to be a bit of a hassle, but it wasn't like he couldn't deal with them. He would first throttle the two closest to him and toss them into a lantern, destroying it. Without any light, that might cause some friendly fire among them, which should make it easier for him to silence them one by one. All right, good plan.

He made this decision with such nonchalance, and just as he was going to put it into action—

"No."

—he heard a little girl's voice, one that didn't belong in the whole situation to begin with.

"Even the whole lot of you doesn't stand a chance against him."

"I thought I told you to stay back!"

"You did. But when you did, I thought I said I would act on my own if the situation called for it."

The speaker stepped into the small space lit by the lantern.

It was a small, gray-haired featureless girl.

Her expression was hard to read; she wore a simple eye patch over her left eye.

"....."

He'd seen her before.

He'd met her before.

Somewhere.

No, that wasn't just it.

They had shared something incredibly special. He remembered—

"...Rgh—"

An electric pain shot through his brain, and he couldn't help but press against his forehead.

"Willem."

So they did know each other. Without a hint of hesitation, the girl called Willem's name.

"Willem."

She called his name again.

"Willem, Willem, Willem...!"

Every time she repeated his name, more and more emotion seeped into her voice.

The girl rushed to him. She tripped over the earth in the darkness a few times as she made a beeline for him. And then—

"I finally found you..."

—she leaped straight into his arms.

She's so warm, he thought.

"I was afraid I wouldn't be able to keep my promise. I was scared."

Her slender shoulders, small enough to seem like they would snap if he touched them, were shivering slightly.

"...Uhhh..."

Unable to either brush her off or hug her back, Willem stood there, unmoving.

He was a little jealous of the soldiers frozen in place around him. They were just like him—surprised and unable to follow what was transpiring before them—but at least they didn't have to worry about a splitting headache.

"Do we know each other?" he asked.

First things first: figure out what was going on.

"Huh?" The girl looked up at him.

"Sorry, but I don't remember who you are at all."

"Wha—?"

"WHAT in the WORLD?!"

It came out of nowhere.

There was a sudden, explosive, voiceless scream right in his ear.

Willem stumbled but managed to right himself. Floating there was an odd creature. He didn't know when it'd shown up... No, it was there so naturally, like it had always been there.

It was a large sky fish, with beautiful scales colored red and white. At least, that's what it looked like. But he knew that wasn't possible. He could see the fish clearly in the darkness, like it had been cut and pasted there from a different picture.

He understood what it was without even having to think about it. It was a hallucination or something of the sort.

"Look here, buddy, that sorta thing is way out of line!" The hallucination dove into a furious rant. "Listen, I'm a little too old to pretend I can speak for any young lady, okay? And I may not be a person, but I have too much life experience to be able to say something appropriate here, okay? And I'm so preoccupied with my own family that I don't really have the mental energy to speak for someone else's kid, got it? But this here is utterly unacceptable, and as someone who was probably a young lady long ago, I simply cannot ignore it!"

"...Uh."

"Be quiet, Carmy."

"I cannot stay quiet! What is up with this guy? Does he just throw women from his past away once he's done with them?! What a typical piece of trash; he is sooo different from all the stories Elq told me. She really looked up to him, you know, and acted like he was some sort of a fairy-tale knight in shining armor, but here we are and he says he doesn't remember anything and I honestly think this is an awful joke like has his memory been sealed away or something—?"

The hallucination paused its rapid-fire rambling mid-sentence.

It gracefully swam toward Willem and poked him on the forehead with its snout.

"Oh my. His memory really has been sealed away."

"Huh?"

The girl blinked.

"And it's just one part of his memory that's been so skillfully locked away. I suppose there are still practitioners who can weave together such high-level enchantments in this world today. Sortilege this advanced could completely erase an entire concept from the world if used properly. To perform such a skill on an individual at this minute of a scale is beyond twisted, if you ask me."

"...I apparently won't be able to preserve my personality if I remember my past. That's why only my memories that connect to my past've been sealed off."

"Ohhh, I see... Wait—" The hallucination recoiled. "You can hear me?!"

"Unfortunately."

"You're kidding me?! I, an ill-fated being, should only be visible to the one I've possessed!"

"I don't think it's all that weird." The gray-haired girl cast her gaze downward. "Both Willem and I have halves of the same spiritual entity inside us. I can't explain all the details involved, but that's probably why."

"Spiritual entity?"

The girl didn't answer his question and instead removed the eye patch covering her left eye.

She slowly opened her shut eyelid.

Her eye underneath was a vivid gold, entirely different from her right eye.

"...Your eye..."

Willem unwittingly placed his hand on his own right eye.

"I knew it. The color of your eye changed, didn't it?"

"I don't really know. But you sure do know a lot about me, don't you?"

His headache had grown just a touch fainter as his mind continued to swim. It was screaming in twisting pain with every heartbeat.

"Willem, I have to ask you something."

"No."

This girl was someone important to him. And he was the same for her. He was intuitively aware of that fact, and squeezing out just that one word came with a massive amount of guilt.

"Listen. They're going to close the faerie warehouse. I'm not a faerie anymore, but no one knows what's going to happen to the others. I've never seen Nygglotho as depressed as she is now."

His head throbbed.

"I said no," he answered, gritting his teeth to bear the pain. "I decided I wasn't going to remember anything from my past. That's why I can't hear your request."

"...Willem..."

"Well, there might not be much we can do." The hallucinatory fish sighed, despite its lack of lungs. "His sealed memory is preventing the Beast from manifesting. It might sound simple, but this is incredibly heavy-duty work. It wouldn't be surprising if the seal broke at any moment—and once that happens, we won't be able to seal it back up. If it were me, I wouldn't want to have anything to do with my past, either."

"But—"

"Asking any more of him is your own selfishness speaking, Nephren. Do you want to be the one to cause Willem here to completely transform into a Beast?"

“.....Urgh.”

The gray-haired girl named Nephren fell silent.

She probably still had something to say. She probably still had so many more things she wanted to express. But it all was crushed in the tightly balled fist she held to her chest.

I'm sorry. He apologized wordlessly to her.

Apologizing probably wasn't enough to solve this. If past Willem could see him now, he'd probably sock him with every ounce of strength in his body and soul so that his head would go flying off his shoulders. And yet, his present self decided to apologize anyway.

“And by the way, Willem. Let's put the past behind us and talk about the present for the moment—do you know anything about my Elq?”

“I do,” he answered readily.

This hallucination Nephren referred to as “Carmy”—he recognized that name. Elq had mentioned it before as the name of a family member who was supposed to come get her.

“She's been waiting for you. She's a little unwell right now, so she's sleeping up on the second floor.”

“Unwell? What?” The fish sounded puzzled. “She's still a corpse, isn't she?”

“The guy who sealed my memory also took a bit off that enchantment that was on Elq's body. Said she's immortal but the closest thing she can be to a real corpse right now.”

“Whaaaaat?!” the fish shrieked in hysterics.

Well then, it sounded like it wasn't just Elq's condition, but everything Nils did was abnormal, even in this absurd creature's eyes.

“I'll take you to her. She's been waiting for her family, too.”

With the guns still pointed at him, Willem took Nephren and Carmy to Elq.

He waited outside the room as the three of them talked and made no attempt to try to eavesdrop. He had no idea what kind of things they were talking about.

After about half an hour, only the gray-haired girl and Carmy emerged.

“We'll be heading out soon.”

Despite how talkative Carmy had been just a moment ago, she was now much more succinct.

“You're not taking her with you?”

“I want to, but she asked for a little more time. She doesn't demand things for herself, but it's always times like these that she never listens.” The big sky fish gave a big sigh. “I hate to ask you this after we've just met, Willem, but could we leave her with you for a little longer?”

“I don't mind, but you sure? You're sort of like her lady-in-waiting, right?”

“Well sure, putting it roughly. Something like that.”

The fish's expression shrewdly turned uncomfortable.

"I'm against this."

Nephren seemed a little grumpy.

"I think we should take her away, even if it means putting a collar on her."

"Oh, you're just being jealous, aren't you?"

"She's like a little kitten, though."

"At least pretend to deny it, sheesh."

What were they talking about?

"We'll be back."

That was all Nephren said before she started to leave the inn.

"H-hey, where do you think you're going?!"

The soldiers chased after her.

"Home. There's no dangerous Beast here."

"Wait! You can't just leave!"

"There's nothing to leave here. I should be the one in charge of making that decision, shouldn't I?"

"That's... Damn it, what was the officer thinking?!"

The soldiers hurriedly chased after the girl as she boldly made her exit.

And with that, their nighttime intruders were gone.

"...So exactly who were those guys anyway?"

"Just our past catching up to us."

Astartos had his head tilted in confusion, and Willem responded in a forced joking manner.

"Was it okay to let them go like that?"

"I don't have a past." Willem shrugged. "I don't know about her, though," he added, looking up to the second floor.

"Her family came to get her, didn't they? What did Elq say?"

"Nothing. She told them she was sleepy and to go away, and then she chased them out of the room."

"Is she okay with not going back with them?"

"Who knows? I dunno how kids think."

That wasn't a lie. But it wasn't the truth, either.

Elq probably stayed because she didn't want to leave Willem alone. He was almost sure. But not entirely.

And he was deeply grateful for it.

"Either way, that's how it is, so it sounds like I'll be staying with you here for a little while longer. Thanks again, boss."

"Yes, of course. You're very much welcome here." Astartos tilted his head, an odd expression on his face. "I'm not sure how to express this, but do at least live with no regrets."

"I'll give it a shot," he responded as lightly as he could muster.

He had no past. That's why it should've been the right choice to ignore that girl's request and turn her down. But it was a right choice that surely made her situation even worse. No matter what he did, it would leave a bitter aftertaste.

"...This is just what I've heard, but..." Astartos started.

"Hmm?"

"But the standard last line in children's stories and fairy tales is *And they lived happily ever after*, right? They say it's so far removed from reality that it could only ever exist in children's stories and fairy tales. It's a dream that could never come to life, like magical swords and resplendent castles. We cling to the phrase *ever after*, ignorant of how empty it really is."

"Wait, don't magic swords and castles already exist, though?"

"Well, now that you mention it, sure."

Despite the interruption, that didn't seem to discourage Astartos as he thought for a moment.

He raised a finger.

"In short, we are unconsciously thinking of the words *ever after* as even more fictitious than all those fantastical objects."

"R-right."

"Time can never stay the same. And eventually, the world itself will come to an end as well. What is important is not only to accept that change will happen but how we use it to face the coming days. No matter how different tomorrow is from today, we can still live on. And so long as we are alive, we can always pursue happiness."

"...*Pursue*, huh. Sure is an honest way of putting it."

"Even those who are indifferent to that sort of thing understand that happiness doesn't come cheap." He shrugged. "You may stay here as long as you like. But when a turning point is upon you, do not hesitate to leave. Because the place where you should live is the very place you are living in at that given moment."

"Got it."

Willem, of course, understood why Astartos started talking about this all of a sudden.

His memory could return at any moment. Elq could become nothing more than a corpse at any moment. No matter how much he pushed away his past, no matter how he clung to the future, these days would not last long.

If he didn't accept that, he would probably grow to curse the world and his fate once the end rolled around. He would eventually harbor a hatred for all the things that wouldn't even allow him to peacefully live his normal days, lacking any outlet for it.

Peacefully living out normal days... It was so easy to forget how much effort and sacrifice such a luxurious wish would need.

"I got it."

These days would not last long. But at this point in time, they were still going. Astartos, Elq, and the vanished Nils all allowed for them to continue.

And so for now, he would just be thankful for the time he had.

As he thought about all of that, he took a sip of the tea he'd left out.

To no one's surprise, it was way too bitter and sour after sitting out for so long.



The Guard started monitoring Willem from the perimeter of the inn.

There were three shifts. The number of people fluctuated depending on the time of day, but there were typically three or four people on duty. They had two main watch points: behind the stone wall on the farm next door and the observation room on the public bridge a little farther away. Both spots were distant enough that no one could keep watch on him with the naked eye, so they'd probably brought in equipment that would allow them to observe him from over a distance. They certainly were hard at work.

It was a nuisance, sure. But it wasn't like there was any actual harm in ignoring them. As Astartos optimistically put it, "The Guard will step in if anything happens, and it feels like we've turned a profit when you think of it as a free way to keep the burglars away," and left it at that.

He did accept they were watching out for them that way, so he offered them some coffee once. They gave him a nasty look. He wanted to strike up a conversation and get an answer as to why they were targeting him, but he just couldn't manage to find the right note.

"Guess I can't interrogate them, huh."

Willem probably could if he wanted to.

His body had a lot of strange skills. Massages and assassination-style fighting techniques were just some of them. If he put them to good use, he didn't think it would be too hard to induce enough pain that could break the will and dignity of the observers without putting a scratch on them.

But of course, if he tried it out, his daily life as it was now would completely fall apart. There was no point in that. So he decided to do his best to not think about who he was or why he was being monitored by the military and just live his life.

It was an uncomfortable, odd time.

He could feel the end of his peaceful days creeping up on him.

3. The Morning of That Day

At the time, Nygglotho was being forced to make one of the top-ten hardest decisions of her entire life.

What should she have for breakfast—a thick-cut bacon sandwich or milk-stewed chamo beef liver?

She already knew the bacon sandwiches here were delicious. The problem was the other option. She wasn't familiar with the chamo breed of cow. Liver varied greatly in taste from shop to shop. All in all, ordering this would be like its own little adventure.

To eat was to live. Choosing what to eat was just like choosing how to live.

"Hrrrrmm..."

Nygglatho stared hard at the breakfast menu, her expression deadly serious.



Meanwhile, Rhantolk was thinking.

As she stared absently at her own dug weapon, she continued to contemplate how she might put her worries about her youth to rest. Who were they, where did they come from, and where did they go? And naturally, what followed: What were they meant to do?

The story about the gods' fragments was so sudden and outrageous yet so entirely convincing. She understood it, as though something she'd felt deep in her gut for a long time had been translated into words. She couldn't argue against it. While it may be true, then, what was she supposed to do about it?

It was the first time she wanted to be like Chtholly. Chtholly had cast aside the reason she was born as a leprechaun, the reason why she was alive, and, instead, had her own reason for wanting to live. She'd found it herself. She lived as she should. Rhantolk didn't think it was something she could hope to imitate so easily, but she couldn't help but feel envious of Chtholly's strength.



Meanwhile, Ithea was reading a book.

It was a cheap work of fiction that had nothing to do with the collection in the Great Central Library. She'd bought it just the other day at the bookstore on the corner. It was called *Bursting Triad*, the newest seventh book in the series that just recently hit the shelves. It was about the same things as the previous books, and it served as an example of what the ordinary should be like. Every character in the book was dedicating themselves to illicit, stolen love, all on the pretext of "true feelings."

It was the times when she read these exaggerated caricatures of stories that she could look at herself and her cohorts objectively—and that's what Ithea was thinking about. All the romantic relationships in this story were tragic. None of the love found in these pages could ever be happy love, and so no one was happy when these relationships came to an end. Things like that struck an odd chord with her.

"Ha-ha!"

The heroine of the story had found another partner to cheat with, her sixth since book one. It was a falconfolk man who was a younger colleague of her third affair. He spoke in the very casual, lazy way that Ithea did to give herself more character.

"Number six, eh...?" She smiled faintly. "If only I had more time, I mighta been able to slip in there..."



At the time, Glick was at the western edge of Island No. 13 at the Elpis Collective aire-port.

By all appearances, he was there as an airship pilot hired by a powerful merchant from Collina di Luce. But in reality, he was spying in an attempt to get a grasp on the shift in power dynamics among trading companies and on the movement of large sums of money.

It was a request made by someone in The Winged Guard who was of a higher status than even Baroni Makish.

The little gray girlie...Nephren said she would be all right on her own, meaning there was no need to force himself to keep watching over her. So he took on the job, saying he'd do anything he could to help.

"Don't really think I'm meant for this..."

Even though he was a salvager, someone who'd dedicated his heart and soul to finding the surface's treasures, he sadly not only had to stay in the sky but also had to keep a watch on others. He had his complaints, but a man could never throw away a job once he'd taken it on.

As he looked around him with a tired exhale, he suddenly spotted several faces that caught his eye. A number of bigwig Elpis merchants with homes in Collina di Luce were all making their way to Island No. 13.

Was there some sort of big meeting going on here? No, wait—if that was the case, then there would be merchants from other islands, too. Why was it that only traders from one city looked as if they'd made an agreement—no, they didn't just *look* like they'd made an agreement but actually did—to pull out and come back here?

They almost looked like passing birds escaping a sinking ship.

"...No way."

He had a bad feeling.



At the time, Nephren was on an airship to Island No. 2.

"I met your friend," the old man said, without a hint of a smile on his dignified face.

He had called himself an adviser for The Winged Guard at the meeting with Nygglotho. But he was actually the creator of Regule Aire and its eternal guardian—the Great Sage Suowong Kandel himself.

When she thought long and hard about it, it was amazing that she was here face-to-face with such a legendary figure. But she wasn't as emotionally moved as she thought she would be. It was probably—no, it was *definitely* because of Willem. She was so used to him that her sensibilities were all out of sorts; she found herself unimpressed with impressive people and impressed with unimpressive people.

"My friend?"

"I didn't ask her name. It was a girl with long blue hair and a strong-willed air about her."

"Ahhh."

Nephren knew right away that it was Rhan.

"She was a good kid. She was doing her absolute best to live."

"?"

She didn't really understand what the old man meant. It was obvious that all living things were doing their best to survive. You could also probably say something similar about the leprechauns, and they weren't even alive, strictly speaking.

She'd heard that a number of her old companions besides Nygglotho had come to Collina di Luce. But she hadn't been able to see any of them, and so she was here now.

"Did you want to see them?"

"Of course. But I understand the reasons why you wouldn't want me to."

Now that the faerie warehouse itself was garnering all sorts of attention, getting any closer would only make others more aware of her irregular existence. And that ran the huge risk of possibly having adverse effects down the line.

But still, if she'd whined and thrown a fit about wanting to see them, they probably could have arranged a secret meeting. But Rhan and Ithea aside, she had a hard time imagining Tiat and Lakhesh keeping quiet about it forever. Well, even if they did manage, she wasn't so keen on making those girls carry such a heavy secret.

"I'm fine as long as they're doing well."

"Ooooooh, how admirable! You're gonna make this old lady cry!"

It was always times like these that the sky fish popped up, and Nephren shooed her away.

In the distance outside the window, she spotted a flowerpot made of crystal floating in the sky.

"...Don't tell me that funny object out there is Island No. 2?"

"It is."

"Is that where there's a person you want me to meet?"

"It is. I wouldn't call him a person, though."

She'd read it in a book once—it was one of the very few unexplored areas left on Regule Aire known as The Pith of the World Tree. Hidden inside were the secrets of the entire island cluster.

"Well, that's a presence I haven't felt in a long time. He sure has locked himself in an exuberant place again," the sky fish murmured by her ear. Once again, Nephren shooed her away.



And at that same time, Willem and Elq had both gone into town to shop for groceries.

Mornings started early in Collina di Luce.

The cause was none other than the morning food market. Hundreds of open-air stalls were crammed into plazas everywhere. Fresh produce sat in mountains on the stall fronts: beans, vegetables, salads, meats, potatoes, eggs, bread, ice, chicken, spices, rotted foods. And energetic shoppers whose numbers rivaled that of the produce.

Willem's gaze dropped to the shopping list in his hand. He had a lot of ingredients to buy today. Wandering around the stalls without any battle plan would be inefficient, so the best course of action would be to think things through first.

"Hey, hey, Willie! What's that? Is it food?"

Elq tugged on his sleeve. She was pointing at a stall with multicolored stones on display.

"Dunno if you'd call it food—more like utensils. Some lizardfolk and stuff like to put those in their stomachs to break up their food instead of chewing."

"Ooooh."

He'd never seen her eyes glisten so visibly like that before.

"Let me just warn you, okay—don't think about trying it yourself. The barrier between races is extremely unforgiving when it comes to biological functions."

"Awww."

She looked disappointed, but this was the one thing he wouldn't let her try, no matter how much she begged. One mistake, and her stomach would be in bad shape. Any more than one mistake, and she would just die.

"Then, what's that? What is that? Can I try that one?"

"You know what that is. That's a tree. That's not gonna fit in our tummies."

"Awww."

She sounded disappointed, but her eyes were immediately looking around the market for the next interesting thing. It was probably best if they finished their errand quickly, before she picked up on anything too weird.

"Oh."

"Hmm?"

And just as that thought crossed his mind, Elq's roaming gaze stopped.

What she was looking at wasn't a market stall but outside of it. It was a regular brick-and-mortar shop—a long-established hat store. When he carefully followed her gaze, he saw that she was staring at a large, wide-brimmed hat on display in the storefront.

"Hmm? What, you want it?"

Elq was currently wearing hand-me-downs from Astartos's daughter. She'd also borrowed a hat in a matching color.

His daughter's outfit suited this little girl rather well. But still...if she herself wanted to look good, then he would help her achieve that goal.

"Huh? ...N-no..."

"No need to be shy. If that's all you want, I'll get it for you. I've got plenty of my salary saved up, since I don't really use it."

"That's not it, really! I mean it!"

She shook her head vigorously.

"I see."

That was too bad, but he wasn't going to force it if she insisted. He backed down.

"Then, we'll finish our shopping without any detours, okay?"

"O...kay."

He began walking again through the throng of people.

Elq followed right behind him, but she would sometimes glance back. It seemed the hat was still on her mind.

He started plotting—the best thing he could probably do was come back later and secretly buy it for her as a present. It looked like it was going to be a little difficult to act on his own without Elq noticing, but it was worth a shot.

By chance...his eyes drifted upward to the sky.

He saw a single midsize airship flying slowly above them.

That in itself wasn't unusual. Collina di Luce was originally developed as a city of commerce. There were always a great number of airships coming and going from the air-port, of course. Be it day or night, it was more unusual to see nothing flying in the sky above the city.

And yet, the airship floating in the sky above them now strangely weighed on his mind.

Something was off. He couldn't really explain the uneasy feeling it gave him.

Its altitude was oddly low, for one thing. Not low enough to hit any buildings, of course, but it was unusual to see an airship flying so low that he could make out the name of the organization it belonged to on the underbelly.

And the name of the organization he saw written there was also slightly off.

Annihilation Knights.

It was such a stupid name, one he found himself reading over and over.

And for some reason, he felt like he'd heard it before. Incidentally, he felt a faint pain in his mind. Did it have something to do with his past? He at least wanted to believe he hadn't been a part of a group that had such an embarrassing name.

"Willie? What's wrong?"

He must've gotten lost in thought staring up at the ship. When Elq tugged on his sleeve, he snapped out of his stupor.

"Nah, it's nothing."

He shifted his gaze down to her.

"Let's go. We'll miss all the good meat if we dillydally; then Astartos'll be disappointed."

"That's true."

They laughed.

Boom.

"—Wha—?"

Willem reflexively directed his gaze back upward. Thick black smoke was billowing out from the bottom of the airship, right near the furnace.

Just a moment later, someone let out a scream.

And then another moment after that, the whole crowd began to scream.

It hadn't been more than a few seconds before full-blown panic erupted. The airship floundered in the air; it was clearly losing its flight capabilities. Anyone could look at it and tell that it was going to fall.

Elq was almost swept away in the crowd.

"Stay with me!"

"O-okay!"

He reached out. Their fingertips brushed against each other. They reeled each other in and kept a firm grip on each other.

And once again, he looked up.

The black smoke was spreading quickly, the airship was dipping even further, the hull started warping under the weight of cargo it couldn't hold any longer, and the screams on the ground grew louder.

Willem saw it. There was a large split in the back of the airship, where the altitude control ballast would normally be loaded. And from that split, *something* that clearly wasn't gravel or bags was tossed out into the air.

What was that?

It was hard to see it against the glare of the sun. He could sort of tell what it was from its dim silhouette.

It was something akin to a bunch of ropes. If he had to liken it to anything, it was like a big snake. But instead of scales, it looked like there were countless long hairs sprouting from its body.

It was a curious creature. No, it was an *object* that he wasn't even sure he could call a creature.

And for some reason, bubbling up from deep inside his gut, he remembered its name.

"No... That's..."

Elq also saw it and apparently came to the same conclusion.

Indeed. He knew that thing well. That thing had given him memories he'd never forget. And even though his memories were sealed away, his whole body and mind were trying to bring them back. This thing had taken everything from him in a dream long ago.

"Au...ro...ra..."

The word absently slipped from his lips.

4. The Qualities of a Brave

The Seventeen Beasts were the greatest threat to all living things.

That fact was passed down as obvious common sense, but it wasn't very well-known what sort of things these Beasts were exactly.

There were two main reasons for that: the first being that things shrouded in mystery weren't very well-known to begin with. And the second being that since those who encountered them typically didn't come home alive, those who were still alive almost universally never had any experience with a Beast.

In other words:

The very idea of being attacked by these things itself was not considered a possibility to all those who were alive in the current era.

Even if they were all soldiers of The Winged Guard, there would not have been any particular change. Most of the soldiers in the Guard had never seen a Beast in real life, so it was hard to say they were ready for them, much less used to them.

Additionally, Beasts were not capable of flight. Timere—the Sixth Beast—could *drift* in the air, conditions permitting, but that was it. So as long as one never dared step foot on the surface, there was no chance they'd ever see any of the other Beasts. That was why all the knowledge regarding Aurora and the know-how to deal with it was fatally lacking in this place.

The Winged Guard command headquarters was in a terrible state of chaos.

Reports of damage flew in from every sector. Half were due to attacks by the Beasts, and the other half were caused by the residents' ensuing frenzy.

And the majority were likely either rumors or false. Everyone everywhere felt like they were caught up in a terrible nightmare, which made it impossible to even begin wishing for proper information at the moment. And yet, the upstanding soldiers who thought they should make a move once they got a hold of any information and acted on that idea were simply adding fuel to the fire.

"Guess it's our time to shine."

Ithea rubbed her eyes as she yawned.

It was hard to tell what was going on outside from where they were. What they did know was that a Beast had come to the island, and judging from eyewitness information, it sounded like their opponent was Number Two—Aurora.

She was sure there was plenty of detailed documentation on Aurora in the material room at the faerie warehouse. However, no one had ever imagined they'd be suddenly thrust into battle with one, so no one took the time to seriously read it. The only exception was Nephren, who would carefully read every word of even the most boring of documents, but she wasn't here anymore.

Still, they never had enough information when going up against a Beast. It wasn't that big of a problem.

"This's pretty atypical compared with our usual fights. I'm a li'l nervous knowing that this's a certain someone's first match."

"Indeed."

Both Ithea and Rhantolk turned to look at Tiat, who was still in her pajamas. She made a funny-sounding squawk.

"I-I'm going, too! Please let me come!"

As they hurriedly forced Tiat to change, Lakhesh waved her hand about vigorously.

"No." Nygglotho shook her head. "You don't have a compatible dug weapon yet."

"But *you* have a sword!"

Nygglotho faltered. So she did.

In addition to the three faeries' Carillon—Valgulous, Historia, and Ignareo—there was a fourth sword Nygglotho had been carrying around for good luck. There was no way any of them could use it, which was why it genuinely could not serve any other purpose besides that of a good luck charm.

Its handle was still peeking out of Nygglotho's enormous rucksack.

"But—"

"I get a bad feeling just holding it. I feel itchy and impatient. I...don't think I'll be much help, but I won't get in the way!"

A quick shot of pain ran through Nygglotho's chest.

"No. You haven't finished your basic post-adjustment training, and I can't allow you to carelessly get so close to danger. The only time I'll let you hold the sword is during tests, at most. You know there's no guarantee you'll be able to wield it without problem in actual battle, right?"

"But!" Lakhesh raised her voice even louder. Then—

"Pardon me, ladies," a man's voice interjected.

Behind them were several men dressed in crisp suits. An orc with a coy face stepped forward from among them. If one squinted, one could see that there were bandages wrapped around various parts of their bodies underneath their suits.

"You're...from Elpis!"

There was a flash of wrath in Nygglotho's voice.

"Eep!"

"M-Miss Nygglotho, what a coincidence to see you here!" As the men shrank back, the orc somehow managed to steady himself. "It sounds quite terrifying out there, doesn't it? We came to you because we thought we might, to the best of our abilities, be able to offer you some assistance."

"The nerve...!"

Elpis had smuggled a Beast into the islands in secret. That's what she'd heard. It was very possible this whole mess was their doing.

There had to be so many people losing their lives in town at this very moment. The Winged Guard and the city's security forces were probably doing their best to fight back. But regular firearms and ammunitions barely

did anything to Beasts in the first place. And in chaos like this, it was hard to think that they'd come up with a proper battle plan.

"You must be mistaken—this commotion was not our doing. According to witnesses, this is apparently the work of a criminal ring called the Annihilation Whatnots."

And he decides to play dumb?

She could tell by the look in his eyes that it was clearly a lie.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't look so upset. We've come to help today out of pure benevolence." As though trying to convince her that he harbored no malice, he waved his bandaged hand. "The legal firepower that The Winged Guard can put to use here is, pardon me, no match for those creatures. But today, a ship filled with our own weapons just happens to be docked at the port." And he deliberately added, "We went through the legal procedures to bring them in, I might add," as though it was an afterthought. "We were thinking of using them to subdue those creatures."

"You..."

Nygglatho understood what it meant for the military of another island to use their weapons in this city. Anyone who'd studied even the slightest bit of history would know.

"You would never be allowed to do such a thing! You would be punished by The Winged Guard under the Regule Aire charter!"

"Oh, no, you're mistaken."

The orc's mouth spread across his entire face in a grin. It was an exaggerated grin, as though he'd traveled all the way here just to tell her that.

"We've already come to an agreement with the upper management of The Winged Guard."

"...What?"

"Oh, and I believe you'll soon receive word from the Orlandry Merchants Alliance, but, well, I'll go ahead and tell you first out of the kindness of my heart," he added, as though pretending like he'd just remembered. "The dissolving of your post and that little hut of yours, as well as a detailed schedule of what is to follow, has already been decided and agreed upon. And of course, that includes the future handling of the equipment that has been kept there, as well."

"That...can't be..."

"Come now, no need to look so sad. A featureless's expressions are truly hard to read, but the only exception is when they're overwhelmed with powerlessness. It's so obvious, I can barely keep back my own smile." He spread out his arms, twirled about a cane he'd produced from somewhere, and placed onto his head a silk hat that similarly appeared from thin air. "And so, Miss Nygglatho, this city is our stage. I would advise you not to do anything like let your faeries run about."

"As for how your cute, precious dolls will be treated once they're taken away from you... Well, you're sharp. You know what you need to do, don't you?"

He didn't wait for an answer before he turned around, and though he didn't outright burst into laughter, he seemed infinitely close to it as the men left for the control room.

"...Oh boy. The Guard's leadership is more rotten than I thought," Ithea muttered. Tiat raised her head and made a quiet yelp of confusion.

"It is entirely possible they went ahead and made a contract without letting us know they were striking a flashy bargain," Rhantolk added. "I suppose they thought they could take on a little bribe just for a bit of extra pocket change, but now they realize there's no going back." Tiat then looked to her and made another, louder yelp of confusion.

"I guess it means the Elpis people are confident they can put on a good show *and* defeat the rampaging Beasts... I'm a little disappointed, but I guess it's okay," Lakhesh lamented.

"D-d-d-don't tell me you actually understood that whole conversation, Lakhesh?!" Tiat cried out, flustered.

"Y-yeah. I had trouble with some of the more difficult parts, but I guess I got the gist of it..."

"Am I the only one who didn't understand?!"

"I-it's okay. Calm down. I'll explain." Lakhesh kept Tiat in check, who looked like she was about to pounce and grab her again. "Ummm, you know about Elpis, right? It's a country on Island No. 13, and it's kind of like a distant neighbor to this island, ummm, and it's like a city-state."

"Yeah, it was the mean country in The Flames of Elpis and the Shadow of Pithos, right?"

"Yeah, but forget what they were like in the projection. So Elpis wants to...I think...start a war or something."

"Why?"

She didn't look like she understood at all.

Lakhesh glanced over to Ithea.

Their eyes met, and Ithea took over the explanation. "There's a magical effect to wars, where a country can ignore their own problems and put 'em off till later. Let's just say, for example, that no matter how bad your relationship is with your neighbor, you won't be fighting when an outside enemy barges in with an ax, right? And no matter how poor or hungry you are, you're not gonna be complaining about that when you're worried about killing or getting killed. The presence of an outside enemy covers up internal problems." Ithea grimaced slightly as she explained such an utterly unpleasant topic. "But when it's peacetime again, all the problems they put aside just come back. When the outside enemy's gone, you remember that you're not friends with your neighbor again. And when that happens, there are only two ways to solve the problem: start a war with your neighbor or start a war with another outside enemy."

“...They don’t think about becoming better friends?”

“Sure they do. They just need to find the next person to wage war with. Timere played that role up till a few days ago. That’s why the majority of Regule Aire got along so well. But...once word got out that Timere wouldn’t be showing up for a while, some countries seemed to remember that they actually didn’t like this or that other guy. And Elpis is one of the groups going straight to work.

“‘S a pretty ingenious way of doing it. If they just openly set out to beat up their neighbor, everyone’d look at them as brutes disturbing the peace of Regule Aire, and they’d be labeled as a new outside enemy. So they changed their approach. They invited in an enemy from the outside and set it loose in their neighbor’s backyard. They go into their troubled neighbor’s yard and gallantly put the enemy in the ground. Their neighbor thanks them and offers their help. And then they live happily ever after.”

She clapped sloppily.

“So that means even though they were ready to be the bad guys, they’re pretending to be the heroes and forcing other people to pay them back?!”

“Yep. Exactly. You sure caught on quick.”

“B-but it’s The Winged Guard’s job to be the heroes, right? Other people can’t just decide they want to do that.”

“That’s why they made sure to take the backbone out of ‘em first. Since the original heroes, The Winged Guard, can’t do their job, then their plan is to rip out the trust that the Guard’s cultivated all this time for themselves by acting all cool when they fight in their place.”

“That’s... But...”

Tiat fell silent, having run out of questions.

Ithea and Lakhesh accepted the reality of the situation and did the same.

“Here you are.”

With silent movements that didn’t match his enormous physique, Limeskin came dashing down the hallway.

“Nygglatho, bring the faeriesss back to the room.”

“...Yes, I know,” Nygglatho muttered quietly.

“Wait one moment. Don’t tell me you’re going to submit to what they just said?!” Rhantolk stepped in between them.

“We are. Thossse are the orderssss from the top, and it iss a way to put an end to thiss danger with the leassst amount of injuriesss.”

“But if we want to make sure they don’t get what they want, then we need to be sure that the weapons they forced to work don’t produce the results as intended. And if we go now, we might be able to lessen the amount of damage to the city.”

“But there will still be a *lot* of damage. And whatever damage you prevent might just end up harming you.” Nygglatho’s voice was like the mew of a frightened kitten. “The reason I sent you off to battle all this time was because I had to. Because no one besides you could take your place. And since now that’s not true, I will never, ever put you in danger. But...” A

flash of strength returned to her gaze. "But this isn't that kind of battle. This is just a hunting ground that they made all the preparations for, that they will do all the fighting in, that they will win and gain all the loot from. There's no reason for me to put your lives on the line for such a selfish display."

"You know that means everything will go the way they want it to, right? Are you just going to keep quiet and let them shut down the faerie warehouse?"

"That's not what I'm saying at all. I will fight them tooth and nail until the very end. But that's *my* fight. It's not something worth risking your life and limb for."

"Mm." However, Limeskin nodded slightly with an exceptionally calm expression. "Let me assk you ssomething. Hasss the guidancsse of the wind reached the hollowsss of your heartsss?"

"...What?"

For the first time in a while, they were greeted by a torrent of incomprehensible lizard speak.

"A blade may not choosss itss own battlesss. One who yearnsss to fight on a sspecssific battlefield cannot be called a warrior. One musst housse the wind within the fingerssss that grip the handle, in the armsss that lift one up."

"...Um?"

Yep. They had absolutely no idea what he was trying to say.

"Ithea." Rhantolk elbowed her friend next to her and whispered, "You know an awful lot of odd facts. You wouldn't happen to know what he means, would you?"

"I could say the same for you, Rhan," she whispered back. "You're studying ancient languages and stuff, right? You're way more suited to foreign culture than I am."

"It might be my hobby, but I'm no good at it. It's not helping at all right now."

"And I have absolutely no idea—I'm raising my hands up in defeat right now!"

"...Um, First Officer...Limeskin?" Ignoring the older girls' quarrel, Tiat took a half step forward. "We love this city. Is that not a good reason...? Um, sir?"

"Ssshould you perisssh in thisss land, then the next land to be threatened will sssuffer even greater injury. Do you underssstand that?"

"I...don't really, no."

"Oh?"

"But if Miss Chtholly were here, I think she would've said... 'I don't care about the next place. Faerie soldiers fight for what's important. I never want to run when things go bad like this, no matter what...' Right?"

Nygglotho gulped. Ithea let out an odd squeak. Rhantolk's eyes wordlessly widened. It was only Lakhesh who didn't seem surprised.

"Thosse who follow in the ssstepsss of a warrior will one day, too, grow to be a warrior...I sssupossse." Limeskin's throat rattled in apparent delight. "I ssshall grant you permissssion to attack, but do not overdo it."

"First Officer!"

Nygglatho was the only one who said anything, a hint of distress in her cry.

"What other option isss there? I cannot make them ssstay here nor have them forcsse their way to the front."

"That...might be true, but—"

"And more importantly, thiss young warrior hass ssshown usss the wind."

The lizardfolk lightly stroked Tiat's hair with his great palm.

"A whole crowd of people could not tie the wind down, nor would the wind allow it. That isss all."



Just as she'd been told ahead of time, Lakhesh stayed back alone.

After getting the biggest hug ever from Nygglatho, she watched pale-faced as Rhantolk, Ithea, and Tiat soared up into the morning sky.

It was when they looked down from the sky that they first realized they hadn't flown at all since coming to Collina di Luce. Viewing the streets and buildings from a different perspective gave them a peculiar exhilaration, like slipping backstage in a theater to get a peek of the cast. It was an odd sensation...like placing a book onto a reorganized bookshelf after an enjoyable read and gazing at the spine from a distance.

Once they slightly lowered their altitude, however, they could see that the streets and buildings were marred.

Buildings had tumbled down into piles of rubble. In the middle of that was a fallen airship. And in spots around that were people, collapsed, lakes of blood splattered around them. There were those with red blood, blue blood, practically clear blood. The various corpses of various races lay scattered throughout the streets like broken dolls.

...It was an objectively horrifying sight.

The faerie race lacked a healthy fear of death, and by extension, they barely felt any aversion to sights and incidents regarding death. Even with a number of corpses around them, for example, that still wouldn't scare them.

And yet, of course, in the face of a mountain of unreasonable death, they grew as furious as anyone would.

"Ahhh! There it is! That's the new weapon!"

Tiat flailed, her whole body indicating her big discovery.

They saw an enormous metal set of armor walking through the street below them.

It was huge enough to fit two or three Limeskin-class giants. That meant there had to be a real giant inside, but its movements were clunky, so that didn't seem to be the case.

Several Auroras noticed its presence and rushed to attack. They used their countless fine hairs to instantly slither to the armor's feet and latched on to its ankles like leeches from a bog. But their hairs, which could pierce through metal when rigid, were all too easily repelled by the armor, and the Beasts all too easily flipped over onto the flagstone street. Just a moment later, a giant war hammer smashed them in two.

"It's...way stronger than I thought it'd be."

"Absolutely. I was just thinking the same."

It was only a few moments ago that they were thinking of Elpis as nothing more than idiots who had grown arrogant when it came to measuring their own strength. They'd assumed that Elpis had a baseless belief that they could absolutely fight and win against the Beasts, which they knew nothing about, because they were so strong.

But the faeries been wrong.

This metal armor was being constantly coated by venenum kindled by unbelievable strength. And that war hammer was the same.

The Beasts couldn't be destroyed by regular means. They could only take considerable damage from an attack of powerful venenum to disrupt the structures of their bodies. That was the reason why the combination of leprechaun and dug weapon had become essential for taking down the Beasts.

And yet, this metal armor was exhibiting venenum output that rivaled that of a leprechaun wielding a dug weapon.

"This new weapon could really serve as a trump card against the Beasts..."

What bothered them was the *source* of the armor's venenum.

Venenum was the inversion of life force. The closer someone was to death, the stronger the venenum they could kindle. If this set of armor was just a mechanism with nobody inside, for example, then there was no way it could use venenum in the first place. But it was hard to imagine there was someone of a big, muscly race who could wear armor of that size and walk around with no problem, plus who had such little life remaining that they were able to wield that much venenum.

(...This power might even be equal to the amount we get when we open the gates to the faerie homeland...)

Opening the gates to the faerie homeland was the name of a phenomenon of self-destruction caused by unstable leprechauns activating venenum beyond their limits. It instantaneously granted them a literally explosive amount of venenum—the heat of which vaporized any Beast that came into direct contact with it.

It wasn't supposed to be something that could be replicated by some combination of technology and physical materials.

(How on earth...does this thing work...?)

This wasn't a question that could be solved by thinking about it. It looked like the product of incredible technology that was beyond the comprehension of any layperson anyway. And yet, they still thought about it.

They noticed something that looked like a droplet of light spill from the armor's right elbow.

They'd seen that light from somewhere before. While they were still trying to remember where they recognized it from, a Beast bit onto the armor's right arm, transformed its countless hairs into needles, and stabbed into its target.

The venenum defenses weren't enough. Thousands of needles pierced the steel plates, cracked them, and tore the armor to pieces.

"Ah..."

What was inside the armor spilled onto the outside. Even though the trio floated far above in the air, they saw it clearly. There was a huge cluster of drops of light, just like the ones they'd seen a moment earlier...

And deep inside it...

...was something bathed in a soft light blue—

"...Huh?"

And the moment they thought they caught a glimpse of it, the entire thing burst into motes of light and vanished.

Despite losing one of its arms, the metal armor kept on moving. It readjusted its grip on its hammer with its left hand and, not in the least affected by what happened, smashed the Beast that had torn its right arm.

"That was—"

They saw it for only a moment.

They could guess what it might be just from that moment.

They weren't entirely sure what it might be from just that single moment.

"It couldn't..."

That was most certainly the piece that served as the basis of the animated armor's power. It was the most secret of secrets. And if it was what they thought it was, then it could easily explain why the armor was kindling and using so much venenum.

—It can't be. Or maybe it can.

But no. That was in complete violation of the island cluster charter. Even if Elpis might gain the right to do so in the near future, they still weren't allowed to give it a try.

Reality and imagination, things she wanted to believe and things she didn't—all of that jumbled up inside Rhantolk's head, and for a brief moment, her mind went blank.



Meanwhile, Willem was closer to the metal armor than Rhantolk was.

And he was in a spot where he could see the inside of its right arm more clearly than Rhantolk could.

And so, in the brief moment before it burst into light and vanished, he saw everything—learned everything.

Inside the armor's right arm, countless strings wrapped around her body, held in place by the armor's rivets, was a girl.

She had bright-blue hair. She had the face of a featureless, lacking both horns and fangs.

She wore a black mask; he couldn't see her face.

Her body emitted a faint light.

Auroras pierced her skin and clung to her entire body; her over-kindled venom was out of control—both these things were fatal. He could tell at a glance that she needed help.

The light grew remarkably stronger.

She burst into pieces. She vanished.

The girl was nowhere to be seen. She was lost to this world forever.

And all of a sudden, Willem was beset by that same painful headache.

"It's an if. Just if."

"If I were to die in five days, would you be nicer to me?"

A voice.

He heard a voice, one that was supposed to be shut away in a tightly locked box and buried deep in the depths of his heart.

"Even if you'll be gone, you wouldn't want to disappear, at least, right? You'd want someone to remember you. You'd want someone to be connected with you."

"Ah..."

His memory was hazy.

He could barely recall the speaker of the voice, the face of the girl.

The strong sentiment that he *shouldn't* was in the way of the regeneration of his memory.

"Then, can you make butter cake?"

She had clear cerulean hair.

Her eyes were deep blue, like the ocean.

She was unreasonably honest, considering how hard she found it to be straightforward, so selfish for how she only ever put herself second, such a confusing girl that she even confounded herself—all that meant that there was someone like that with him not too long ago—

"H-hey! Ow! That hurts! I can't breathe! Stop! I'm covered in mud and I have scratches everywhere and I haven't cleaned myself and everyone is watching— Are you even listening?!"

No.

The flash of light blue he'd just seen was different from the sky blue in his memory.

The life that had just vanished before Willem's eyes wasn't hers.

It couldn't be. She wasn't here anymore.

"Yeah... I...I tried really hard..."

He wanted to make her happy.

He wanted to cling to that desire.

He wanted to forget about the past and think only of the present and the future.

That was true back then. The same as it was now.

In the moment after he made his wish, he lost both the present and the future he so yearned for.

"Thank...you."

That light blue he saw wasn't her. He knew it wasn't.

It was someone else, a completely different faerie.

But it was enough. Willem was starting to remember.

Chtholly Nota Seniorious.

She wanted someone to remember her even after she was gone.

"Damn...it..."

Who was he cursing when he unwittingly let those words slip out?

Himself, the one who'd forgotten her?

Himself, the one who had to forget in order to preserve himself?

Himself, the one who was at the brink of no return because he had regained those pieces of his memory? Or maybe all of the above?

"Willie!"

Elq rushed over to him.

"Stay away!"

"It's okay. There aren't any Beasts nearby anymore."

"You're wrong. There's one right here!"

With a quiet squeak of her leather shoes, Elq froze in her tracks.

"Willie, no..."

"I can still do it. I think I can still...pull back," he groaned in response.

He wasn't pretending to be strong. The seal that Nils Didek—*why the hell's that goddamn master of mine still even in this world, looking like it's no big deal?*—cast on him was sturdy, even flexible.

Willem Kmetsch was being reduced to a mere Beast. Be it his spirit or his soul, they mixed with the obstructive thoughts that had flaked away from Chanteur and altered his physical form. While his outer appearance was mostly unchanged, his insides were already too far gone to fit within the framework of a normal life.

Nils's seal was like separating the milk and tea in milk tea to stabilize it.

That balance wouldn't fall apart with just a little shake after it had settled. As long as he didn't stick a spoon in and mix it around himself, then the memories that surfaced would soon fade and vanish. When that happened, he'd go back to how he was not too long ago. He could go back to the lazy days at the inn.

That was right. He could still pull back now. So long as he wished he could.

"Willie..."

"Stay away."

He stood up.

He lightly tapped various parts of his body to check the state he was in. He was mostly all right. His field of vision was narrowed from keeping one eye shut, and there was an intense throbbing in his mind as always. But his limbs were working and moving. His bones and muscles were still those of an emnetwiht. He inhaled and exhaled, confirming that his lungs and diaphragm were no different. With everything in order, he should be able to use all the skills that required an emnetwiht form.

"Wait—"

"Go to Carmine Lake, Elq Hrqstn," he spat coldly, turning his back to her. "I'll thank you for sticking with me through this little detour. But go where you need to go."

"But—"

"—*Please* listen to me."

He turned back to look at her and chuckled.

"I won't be able to take anyone with me where I'm goin'."

"Willie!"

He didn't respond when she called to him. He faced forward again.

What am I? Willem thought.

An emnetwiht. Former Quasi Brave. One without an exclusive Carillon.

Second Enchantments Officer of The Winged Guard. Just a decoration. The faerie warehouse manager.

The world ended long ago.

The book closed on the Braves' story long ago.

So then...what was he doing here?

There wasn't much time left for him to be himself. He had to wrap up all the things he could do while he could. He had no time to lament his imminent departure.

Information of a particularly irksome enemy was probably being shared among the Beasts. He thought they'd been scattered all throughout the city, but they started to gather around the metal armor, one after the other.

And every time the armor swung its hammer, there was one less Beast. It was outnumbered, but there was a clear difference in power. The Beasts were overwhelmingly irrational enemies, but overwhelming venenum was one of the very few ways one could combat them. As long as it was working effectively against the Beasts, nothing could be considered too strange.

The sight of the Auroras eventually vanished.

"Man, that thing's strong."

He had a general idea of what that big ol' hunk of armor might be.

It was a new weapon to be used against the Beasts, created by some military organization. By constantly manifesting an incredible amount of venenum both offensively and defensively, it endured the Beasts' attacks and enabled it to fight back, even without the amplifications granted by the

Carillon. Sure, if they could securely use this thing, then it was a weapon much easier to use than putting swords in the hands of unstable girls.

It was truly a big development. If he'd never known what was inside, Willem would have probably wanted one for himself.

"Bet it was a pain to develop. If someone'd found out they were doing this before they were done laying the groundwork, all the people involved probably would've been shipped straight off to jail."

They probably planned this out very thoroughly.

They probably invested a whole lot of time and money to plan it so carefully.

The plan itself probably had a development code name that reeked of idealism and adventure, and they probably put a cool-looking identifying signature on the machine itself to match the name.

He felt like he'd come across something filled with such deep emotion like this before, too. And back then, he'd shattered the fruits of those labors without a second thought.

This was just the same as then.

"Sorry. I think it'll be a bit of a pain in the ass if we let a weapon like you come into use."

He tore away the eye patch on his right eye and snapped his golden eye open.

An irritating gray blanketed his entire vision.

(...Someone's an angry Beast, aren'tcha?)

DESTROY ERASE RETURN GO BACK DEMOLISH— The intense desire to destroy accompanied an endless fountain of words. But as long as he was ready for it beforehand, he could keep it in check. He could move around in this body consciously as Willem Kmetsch for five or so minutes.

Nightingale Sweep. He fell forward as hard as he could, closing the gap between the armor and him in a breath.

(This is the only time I'll agree with you. Let's turn this guy to dust.)

As Willem approached, the armor seemed to recognize him as an enemy. It swung its hammer at him with dreadful speed supporting its insane superstrength. And just a split second after followed an intense gust of wind.

(Yikes.)

As he watched his bangs flutter before his eyes, he finally took the last step he'd been holding back. It was the ideal distance, just a little more than a half step. He threw himself forward into the air, spun to the side, and used the force from his spin to slam his fist right into the joint of the armor.

There came the sound of oil jumping off a hot pan. The venom, shooting up to an explosive intensity in an instant, was trying to forcefully blow his hand away. He became aware of an intense pain of his skin melting off, his flesh charring. Yet, Willem paid no mind to it, pushing forward to strike with his palm.

He twisted his arm inside the armor up until his elbow, grabbed what was in there, and pulled it out, snapping countless suspending threads as he did so.

There was a young girl with hair the color of dandelions.

Like he'd thought, she had been in a state of overdrive for a while, thanks to her over-activated venenum. There was a faint light emitting from her whole body. She could explode at any moment.

"Do you want to rest?"

He doubted she could hear him, but he asked anyway.

He thought he saw a slight smile cross her face.

He touched a finger to the center of her chest, lightly pressing down out of time with her heart. His lethal timing threw her heart out of rhythm, and it instantaneously stopped.

If he could stop the flow of her blood, her venenum wouldn't stay in overdrive. The leprechaun with a name he never knew quietly died.

Now, without the venenum to keep operating, the armor froze in place. Willem pulled out another girl who was in the chest area and ended her life the same way.

With a quiet *puff*, the two husks burst into droplets of light and vanished.

Still surrounded by the specks of light as they drifted on the wind, Willem stayed silent for a moment, mourning them.

He inhaled.

Exhaled.

He didn't know those faeries. They didn't belong to the warehouse, at least. That meant that despite being born on the island cluster, they had never been able to reach the warehouse. These girls had been snatched away and made into parts for a weapon before they could.

If only they'd been just a touch luckier, they would've been brought to the faerie warehouse just like everyone else... And even if their fate as a weapon itself didn't change, they could've spent such carefree, such happy days there.

But that never happened.

Willem bit his lip. It was always like this. He had felt this way so many times, ever since he set his heart on becoming a Brave. By the time he'd found someone he wanted to save, things had already passed the point of no return.

".....Do it."

He scowled at the armor husk with his right eye, granting permission to the Beast in his heart.

With a silent cheer, a part of the biology he inherited from Chanteur came free.

It was a state of being that turned the environment around him back to its most primitive form, transforming all the Visitors' creations—basically anything that wasn't a Beast or dirt or sand—back to their original state.

The Visitors—or rather, the Poteau that served them—took this empty land of sand and created a rich earth from it. And so all the things that were born from that earth would be turned back into dust when reverted to their original forms.

Poof.

With an inelegant sound, what was once a broken set of armor turned into a mountain of gray dust.

The area around him was silent.

Of course it was. No one wanted to stay long in a place where ferocious monsters were running amok. The inhabitants of the city were smart, and they were quick. As Willem turned his head to look around, he spotted only a single person.

“Rhantolk.”

When he called her name, the girl took a few steps forward, as though steeling herself...

Yet, she didn't bother getting any closer.

The Carillon in her hand, Historia, was giving off a faint glow, indicating it was ready for battle.

Impressive.

The faeries were children in substance, so they all tended to be straightforward. Once they got close to someone, they ran the risk of never doubting anything they did or said. And he got the feeling that unlike the rest of them, Rhantolk was one of the few who could make more levelheaded judgments. Even now, she still kept her guard up when she saw him, cautiously aware that something was off.

...He would just forget about the possibility that she simply hated him to begin with.

“Since you're here on the island cluster, that means the *Plantaginesta* got back safe, huh? I was real worried. Why're you here?” he asked.

“What are you saying? I was just about to ask you the very same. It's been quite a while since I saw you last, Officer.”

“Sure has. You alone today?”

“Hey, who knows? Someone might be hiding nearby.”

Well then. She wasn't concealing how wary they were of him. She was even using it as a bargaining chip to keep him in check. She was a very collected, clever girl.

In his normal state, Willem would've easily been able to tell how many faeries were nearby. The uncertainty of an ambush would never work in a negotiation with him. But now, bearing this constant headache as he spoke, things were different.

“Does the talk of the faerie warehouse closing have anything to do with this guy?” he asked, lightly kicking the mound of sand.

“Where did you hear that from?”

They'd talked about it when Nephren paid him a visit. He hadn't concerned himself at the time, since he had no memory, but thinking back on it now, he understood exactly what he'd ignored.

"A lot's happened. Well?"

"You're correct. The Elpis Air Defense Force has been plotting to take away the rights to fight the Beasts from The Winged Guard, and they've been touting that thing as an even stronger weapon than us."

I see.

The answer was mostly in line with what he was expecting but, at the same time, more than he had foreseen.

It was easy to tell what that military was plotting. But now that they'd created such a strong weapon in reality, it would be hard to stop them.

Oh, wait.

That wasn't entirely true. It was hard to call it a *smart* way of doing things, but there was a way of dealing with it.

(...Gh—)

His headache was getting worse. His remaining time was ticking down as he stood here.

There was no more time for Q&A.

"I have a question for you. What have you been doing all this—?"

"Sorry, but I'm gonna have to turn down all nonurgent requests. I'm gonna answer what's probably the biggest question on your mind right now."

"Wha—? Ah?!"

Rhantolk took a huge leap backward. At the same time, the lamppost, the bench, and the sign right by where she had been standing just a split second earlier all transformed into dust then crumpled to the ground.

"That power... Don't tell me you've actually turned into a Beast?!"

Willem smiled.

"A subspecies of Chanteur. I guess."

"No—"

"The Beast inside me is just a massive ball of desire to regress. It wants to take back the world it once lived in. That urge directly translates to wanting to destroy the world as it is now."

"But—"

"Do you know how hard it is to live in a world where your home no longer exists?"

Rhantolk gulped.

"So let's put questions aside now. It's time to begin, oh great protector of Regule Aire—"

He cut himself off and leaned forward slightly. He utilized the structure of his physical form to its limit, falling forward as fast as he could. It was one of the greatest heights of wisdom that the emnetwiht weaved together and rested their destinies on.

Nightingale Sweep.

He caught Rhantolk off guard, twisting his body and closing the distance between them in a moment too quick for her to react.

Anything she could do wouldn't be fast enough. He was confident she was dead.

The remaining space between them could be covered in just a little over half a step. He turned. He aimed precisely for the vital spot in the center of her chest, the same spot he'd used to kill the previous two, and after passing briefly through her blind spot, he readied his fingers to pierce—

But he was stopped.

A single great sword had been thrust in the slightest of gaps between Willem and Rhantolk. A flash of heat ran through Willem's fingertips. Rhantolk's bangs fluttered.

Carillon Valgulous.

"Dunno if I like that just the two of you're goin' at it!"

She was right beside them. Ithea, who'd rushed over without him noticing, had her eyes narrowed, her normal smile spread across her face.

"Couldja let me join in?"

"Sure, but I'm not goin' easy on you."

"Nya-ha-ha, hearing you say that makes it easy enough for me!"

Ithea twisted her wrist. Valgulous's blade drew an odd, sharp angle in the air, aiming to pierce Willem's neck. When he ducked to dodge it, he saw the sword was now somehow coming straight down on his head.

"Whoa!"

He rolled backward, just barely escaping the attack.

"I'll be da— You dodged it!" Ithea remarked dryly. "Impressive. I've never missed in battle with that one."

"I bet."

The corner of his mouth twitched. A drop of sweat rolled down his cheek. He learned in that moment that he could still sweat, even after turning into a Beast.

"An inertia-controlling surprise attack right off the bat... You're seriously not pulling any punches, are you?"

"I mean, I'm actually pretty serious about'cha, Officer," she said, a hint of jest in her voice as she immediately followed up with another attack.

He barely felt any force coming from the venenum in her blade, but that didn't necessarily mean he would walk away unharmed.

"Hol... Hold on, you two! What are you doing?!"

A good several seconds too late, Rhantolk cried out.

"Can't you tell? I'm receiving the officer's love and affection!"

"That's not somethin' you should say while you're attacking me!"

"I'm not here to listen to your jokes!"

"Jokes?"

The back of Willem's hand sent Valgulous flying off to the side, and Ithea wavered—or at least, that's what he wanted to happen. Instead, she

deftly kicked off the flagstone street and leaped into the air, rolling back to put distance between them.

"I'm not making any jokes. Rhan, don't tell me you still don't get why the officer's doing this!"

"...What?"

Willem clicked his tongue.

"Y'don't have to say any more than you need to."

Still on one knee, Ithea kept talking.

"He's givin' us a duty."

"I said, you don't have to say it."

"We were the last and strongest bastion that kept Regule Aire safe from the Beasts. That label is what got us sent us off to battle, but it also protected us. That big armor boy was good proof of that. I knew right away exactly how the guys from Elpis wanted to put us to use."

In truth, that technology was nothing to sneeze at. The developers of that armor had figured out how to open the gates to the faerie homeland while controlling the massive amounts of venenum released as the faeries went into overdrive. They were treating it not as an instantaneous explosion but as high-output fuel that would last as long as the weapon was in operation. While the fate of the faeries stayed the same, they were much easier to use as weapons this way.

"That's why he's trying to give us back the title one more time." Ithea averted her gaze slightly. "That big armor thing was absolutely no match for the officer—for this Beast. If we can kill the Beast, then that'll show everyone they can't ignore a leprechaun's tactical worth. At least, Elpis's expectations will fall completely off the mark."

"Ah." Rhantolk let out a small noise but then covered her mouth with her hand.

Ithea stood as she wiped the corners of her eyes.

"...This idiot's putting his life on the line 'cause he wants to keep the faerie warehouse safe."

"You really didn't have to spell it out."

His plan didn't require them to understand.

If he had simply fulfilled his role as the Beast, as the evil they needed to defeat, then everything afterward would've gone just fine.

"...Hey, you guys. Do you like the little ones at the warehouse?"

"Sorry?" Caught off guard, Rhantolk widened her eyes.

"What?" Ithea tilted her head.

"Are you fighting with your lives on the line to protect them?"

"Tha..." Rhantolk's face flushed a bright red. "That doesn't matter!"

Willem burst out laughing.

"Hah... Ha-ha-ha!"

He missed them. Oh, how much he missed them.

That was right. Once long ago, he asked Chtholly the same thing.

And the answer he'd heard from her back then was the exact same one that Rhantolk gave.

"Oh man, you guys! Really, you guys have no idea—!"

—How much he cherished them.

It all came back to him—memories of what it was he was trying to do in this world.

He no longer had a battle here in this world.

But there were those fighting with the same feelings in their hearts as he and his companions once had.

The least he could do was support them.

He would make sure it was them—instead of himself, a man who never saved anyone—who would carry out their wishes to protect the people they loved—

"—Let's go."

Willem couldn't use venenum now.

Venenum was the inversion of life force. The closer someone was to death, the stronger the venenum they could kindle, and the stronger that force was, the quicker they were being pulled toward death. Viewed from a different angle, those who were strangers to death were not compatible with venenum. People born into hardy races like Limeskin and Nygglotho could not even produce it in the first place.

Willem's body was now no longer that of an emnetwiht. It was doubtful if he still even had a future that included the ending of death to begin with. That was why.

And of course, he was bare-handed. The only weapons he could use were the martial arts he'd learned and freeing his true nature as a Beast to turn his opponents to sand. And since the faeries didn't strictly have physical bodies, the latter might not even be very effective against them. In practicality, the only thing he could rely on was his own techniques as a person.

It would be a hard fight, but he would put his all into it.

And *this* time, he would finally put an end to his own battle.

He slid his body forward as he inhaled. Haze Step. Ithea must have sensed the danger—she suppressed the area around her by releasing an arc of lightning from her sword. He slipped through the whole thing and came up right beside her. He spotted Rhantolk start moving just a moment later, but she wouldn't make it. He aimed for Ithea's chin with his right elbow and her side with his left fist. She let Valgulous go. Releasing a heavy object mid-swing would obviously cause anyone to stumble. His elbow and fist just barely missed their marks. Ithea reached out and grasped Willem's hair. She pulled hard, bringing his whole head into her chest. The layer of venenum around her made her incredibly physically strong, and he couldn't jump out of reach.

"Rhan!" Ithea called. "Hurry!"

"Urgh..."

Though she still seemed hesitant, Rhantolk moved to do what she needed to do. She extended Historia forward, and its tip thrust straight into Willem's stomach. The venenum-tinted blade ripped his flesh apart, sinking deeper and deeper into his abdomen.

Rhantolk's expression twisted on the verge of tears. The strength faded from her arms.

"...Ah...ah..."

"Is that all?"

Willem pressed his fist against Ithea's chest. He forced the blow through her venenum defenses. He crushed her lungs, and Ithea fainted wordlessly in agony, the strength dissipating from the hands that held his head in place.

"Ithea left two things out when she was talking earlier. If you're not strong enough, then you will all be destroyed, and that's the end. I know you hear it a lot, but it's way better to die now than suffer later."

He tossed Ithea away, grasping Historia's blade as it protruded from his stomach.

"And the other thing—I'm already a Beast. My sense of self that's keeping me here chatting like this is gonna vanish soon. If you can't stop me now, then Island No. 11 is gonna fall."

Rhantolk's face twisted in even further pain, and she pulled Historia out of him. The blade was wet with red. She held it up above her head. Her movements were slow, full of openings. He could strike at her wherever and whenever he wanted.

—Is this an invitation?!

He threw his left fist and extended his right foot in a kick. Neither was a serious blow—since she'd given him an invitation to attack, it was just an invitation in response to draw out Rhantolk's real motives. As a result, she twisted her body, forcefully dodging the trajectory of his follow-up attacks, then placed all her momentum into Historia and followed through.

A torrent of wind with the sharpness of a guillotine blasted across his neck.

"I see."

Willem managed to slip behind Rhantolk with clingy, slimy movements and whispered in her ear.

"I'm glad to see you stopped hesitating. But y'know, if that's how you attack after you go all out, then there's no way you could ever kill m—"

"Taaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Right by his ear came a cute yet powerful battle cry from the third faerie.

—Hah?

Tiat.

Oh right. I forgot.

The one who took her to this city for the first time was none other than Willem himself.

This girl was a faerie soldier, too—a protector of the island cluster, with Carillon in hand, the legitimate successor of the Braves.

—*Ignareo!*

The Carillon that Tiat had, Ignareo, wasn't a high-class blade by any means. It was a plain sword, one that was just a shade more capable than those that were mass-produced. Its characteristic talent was also one that had only so many uses—to become unnoticeable.

—*And she's already putting it to use? Man, she's growin' up fast!*

But of course it turned out this way; he'd been focusing all his attention on Ithea and Rhantolk. His never-ending headache hadn't helped, either. Still, the fact that Tiat had gotten this close without him noticing was worthy of praise.

The sword's ability didn't come naturally once the blade first rested in its wielder's hand. She would've had to spend quite a long time facing her own sword in earnest to even begin to get the sense of what she had to do and what sort of effect that would produce.

This girl would be a wonderful soldier. That's right—he remembered that cyclops doctor saying that once upon a time. He had been absolutely right. She did just that. Doc was a smart one.

But she wasn't quite close enough.

He thrust Rhantolk away and turned to face Tiat.

She had the spirit; she had enough determination; her movements weren't clouded by hesitation. But she was hopelessly lacking in physique, in strength, and in technique and experience. Whether or not she succeeded in a surprise attack, she was giving Willem Kmetsch enough time to counterattack, which meant there was no hope left for h

Thoom.

“...Huh?”

An enormous blade stuck out from Willem's chest.

He knew the shape of this blade.

It was one of the oldest Carillon—Seniorious.

—*No way— Chtholly?*

His mind muddled with vague confusion, Willem tried to turn back.

His body was stiff. With great difficulty, he turned his head around.

“Ooh... W-wah...”

There he saw a face, sloppy from crying.

He knew that face well. And it was one he hadn't anticipated at all.

“La...khes...?”

“Waaah... M-Mister...Willieeee...!”

Why was she here? She should still be too little.

...Oh, wait. That wasn't true. Kids grew up. You take your eyes off them for a second, and they change completely.

New strength had been growing in the faerie warehouse while he was away.

“...Ha-ha.”

He was so happy.

The broken souls of children who'd supported this dying world—they really were strong. Much more than he—who'd spent all his time lost—would ever be.

He wouldn't need to worry about the future.

Even if he wasn't around, even if he couldn't do anything for them, they'd be okay.

After a whole tale of redundancy after redundancy, he could finally put an end to the story of the failed Brave Willem Kmetsch.

"Good. You barely did it, but you passed."

He chuckled. Blood poured from the corner of his mouth.

"Oh, but Lakhesh? I can't give you full points based on how you're using Seniorious so far. If you're going up against an immortal being, you need to actually use it as an immortal slayer. Seniorious is seriously crazy—it succeeded in keeping the Visitor Elq Hrqstn sealed up for five hundred years, y'know."

"Huh...?"

"Watch carefully. This's how ya do it."

He placed his palm on the blade.

The Carillon heightened its venenum in response to the power of the opponent it was fighting with. Even though Willem couldn't produce any venenum as he was now, the inside of Seniorious was overflowing with more than enough power. That was plenty for Seniorious to work its miracles.

He plucked at the veins of enchantment that ran through the blade, one at a time. A quiet sound filled the air, almost as though he was playing the harp. Together, the sounds became notes and began to perform a clunky lullaby.

Seniorious, considered ancient even among the Carillon, was said to be one of the proudest of the abundant holy blades. The reason for that was because there were very, very few people who could wield it.

Explained properly, these were the requirements to use Seniorious:

Only those without a home to return to, those who'd given up on going back to the place they wanted to, those who'd already cast away their own futures could earn the right to wield Seniorious.

It wasn't someone tragic. It wasn't someone who'd surpassed tragedy.

It wasn't someone without hope. It wasn't someone who'd given up on hope.

Only those who accepted that they would never reach the future they so wished and hoped for could take the sword in hand and aim for a different future.

The cracks running along the great blade spread farther.

A faint light spilled from the spaces in between.

The characteristic ability of the greatest Carillon in the mortal world revealed itself. Its power to turn any and all things into the dead made no exceptions for immortal targets.

The faint light slowly weakened then vanished.

"Officer...?" Rhantolk murmured quietly as she raised her head.

"Willem...?" Tiat called his name in a daze. She still held Ignareo high above her head; there was no one to bring it down on.

"Oooh... Waaaah..."

All Lakhesh did was muffle her own voice and burst out in sobs.

You big dummies.

He couldn't speak anymore, so he just smirked to himself.

You won. You eliminated the dangerous Beast and protected the islands. You're heroes. You proved your worth. You secured all your futures with your own hands.

So be happy.

Be happy for me.

Start crying now, and you're just gonna forget why I'm dying here in the first place. This is all Ithea's fault. She just had to go and expose my tricks. My plan to play the perfect villain went up in flames.

Ahhhh, crap. I could just never do anything right, could I? Why's it that everything I try never ends up going well?

—That's okay, though, right? It's very much like you to always be trying your hardest.

He thought he heard her giggling at him.

There was no way he could hear that voice. He knew immediately it was a hallucination.

But still.

He was happy he got to hear her voice in the end.

(.....)

There were so many things he wanted to say to her.

So many feelings he wanted to share with her.

But he didn't have either time or energy left to do that. And so—

(Thank you.)

—at last, he murmured that one phrase silently in his heart.

Fwoom—his vision went dark, like a curtain had dropped.

A feeling of weightlessness enveloped him. It felt like he was endlessly falling.

He plunged into the surrounding blackness—far, deep, and heavy. Down, down.



—Island No. 2.

Nephren suddenly whirled around.

There, she saw an odd garden that looked like a bizarre mishmash of the seasons. And beyond that was an endless blue sky.

"What is it?" the Great Sage asked, but she didn't answer.

Instead—

“...That idiot,” she whispered.
—just one small, lone tear trickled down her cheek.



Could I Snuggle Up to You?

-starry night-

Could I Snuggle Up to You?

-starry night-

The regular days were constantly at the point of coming to an end.

As these ending days repeated themselves, they created a routine.

There were those who joined the routine, as well as those who left it.

It would continue on, changing its pace and rhythm little by little, until it was time to truly face the end.

The newspaper reported that the Beast attack was the work of the Annihilation Knights. They were a notorious group that often brought violence and destruction to the city anyway, so the people very naturally accepted the information and believed it.

No one ever learned what sort of deal took place among Elpis, Collina di Luce, and, by extension, The Winged Guard. One might not be able to emotionally help wanting to spread the truth, but one misstep could cause an entire war.

But at the very least, the Elpis Air Defense Force lost a great deal of their standing as a result of the incident. There was also word of appropriate personnel changes in the upper echelons of The Winged Guard, so it was unlikely that anything similar would be happening anytime soon.

...There was one more thing: In a small column in the corner of the newspaper, there was a report detailing the discovery of a corpse of an orc who had met a suspicious end.



Elq Hrgstn returned home.

This event shook the foundation of peaceful Island No. 2, Regule Aire's most sacred, secluded region—almost literally, in fact.

"AAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH ELLLLLLLQQQ!" a massive black skull howled.

It was the One Who Dozes in Death, the One Who Burns the Flame of Darkness in the Garden of Light—one of the three divine Poteau and holder of plenty pompous nicknames, Ebon Candle. He tossed aside all dignity and nobility and everything else and shouted as loud as he possibly could.

A strange light in the depths of his empty eye sockets flickered intensely, and his lipless teeth chattered loudly against each other.

"I'm so, so, so happy you're saaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaafe!"

"Oh, be quiet, you useless lump!" the massive red sky fish sharply scolded.

Carmine Lake, another one of the three Poteau, swam in circles in the air, making her anger clear.

"What have you even been doing all these five hundred years?! I will say you did a good thing protecting the world with your master's soul. I mean it. But why haven't the repairs on our starship made any progress this entire time?!"

"Wh-what am I supposed to do?! Look at me—I have barely any power, not even enough to reconstruct my body the way I want!"

"Because you're wasting your time! You ought to just drop this whole floating world thing for good!"

"Would if I could, fool!"

"Oh, shush, you two!" Elq yelled as she pushed herself between the two deities and squared her shoulders.

"But, Elq, if we don't get him his power back and undo the curse on you soon, you're going to stay a walking corpse forever, you know. Don't you want to go back to normal?"

"Th-that's taking an optimistic approach..."

"Not really."

"Wha—?" "Hmm?" The two voiced their confusion at the same time.

"I'm okay like this."

"Wh-wh-why?!" cried Carmine Lake. "Even if we manage to fix the starship, your body won't even be able to endure boarding it if we don't revive you properly! You won't be able to leave this world!"

"I'm not going anywhere. I like this world a lot."

"No, no, wait just a minute! This world is long finished, you know! There's practically nothing here! We're in the final countdown before everything completely disappears!"

"But there's still time left."

"Since when are you the type to live for the moment?! Hold on. Hey, Ebon Candle! Say something to her!"

"H-hmm?"

The skull, now suddenly in charge of the conversation, clicked his teeth in puzzlement.

"Did you make a lot of friends living on the islands?"

"...Yeah."

"I see, I see. Was there a boy you liked?"

".....No, not really."

"Hello?! What are you even asking her?! And what does that answer mean?!"

"He's not really that cool. Chtholly and Lillia shouldn't have settled for him."

"I see, I see."

The skull smiled like a cheery old man, nodding several times.

The sky fish swam in circles around them, ranting and raving about one thing or another.

Nephren idly watched them carry on.

Carmine Lake hadn't gotten her physical body back yet. She was still attached to a part of Nephren's spirit. But as long as Nephren stayed within the unique barrier that surrounded Island No. 2, the fish could move around within the barrier as she pleased and mingle with whomever she wanted. Apparently, Carmine Lake was *"also acting as a specimen archive of the primitive world, so we can mix our physical bodies and spirits to a small degree,"* but Nephren didn't really understand. She didn't even get a full, detailed explanation. She wanted a manual.

"Say, Kaya?" she called to the ailuranthrope girl who served Ebon Candle.

"Yes, Lady Nephren?"

"What are you making for dinner tonight?"

"I have not yet decided. However, the summer garden's crops are doing quite well, so I plan to make something from the harvest."

"Okay. I'll help you later," Nephren replied then turned to leave the room.

"Where are you going, Lady Nephren?"

"To Willem."

Willem Kmetsch's body had been taken to Island No. 2 and was at rest deep inside it. Ebon Candle proposed that he be encased in ice again, but Elq and Nephren shot him down.

Willem lay deceased on a neatly made bed, like he was just taking a nap.

"...Aren't you...cold?"

Nephren touched his hand. It was cold.

"Aren't you...lonely?"

She touched his cheek. It was cold, too.

She wanted to put a blanket over him. But there was no point in doing that, of course.

She even wanted to crawl next to him and doze off, like she had happened to do once before. But there wasn't even any point in doing that anymore, either.

"Ebo said it wouldn't be hard to bring him back to life." Elq had appeared at some point in the doorway. "It's the same as me. If they undo Seniorious's curse just a teeny bit, then he wouldn't be a corpse anymore, and he'll come back to life on his own."

"But as a Beast, right?"

"Of course. That wouldn't be a problem for you, right, Nephren? You're the same kind of Beast he is."

"No point." Nephren shook her head. "I wouldn't be happy hogging a broken Willem all to myself. I..." She thought for a moment. "...I don't want him to be unhappy."

"Boo. You have bad taste, too," Elq said with disappointment as she entered the room.

And she walked straight over to Willem, plopping down on her side on the bed beside him.

"What are you doing?" Nephren asked her.

"Taking a nap."

"Why here?"

"No real reason, but it keeps me calm... Ow, ow, ow, ow!"

Nephren pulled on her ear and dragged her out of the bed.

She dragged her all the way out of the room.

"No sleeping together."

"Why, why?! It's totally fine, since we're both corpses, right?!"

"That spot is reserved for me. I won't give it up, not for a corpse or a god."

"Tyrannyyyyy!"

She dragged her far away from him.



He was in a dream.

He could see the sunset.

The sun was partially hidden behind a pitch-black horizon.

At his feet was a small platform, paved in gray hexagons. Beyond the platform was an empty black space.

The only things here were the vanishing sun and the small remaining bit of platform. There was nothing else. It was an old world—one that was ending, one that was disappearing.

A young man stood there.

There was nothing for him to do or to think about, so he simply stared out blankly, gazing at the sinking sun.

The young man suddenly noticed the presence beside him.

He wasn't sure when it got there, but on the ground was a small chunk of crystal.

What is this? He stared at it, and with a loud cracking sound, it fissured, swelled, bent, smoothed, and took a shape similar to that of a person.

Oh, I see now.

The young man recognized it as the Beast inside him. It was half of who he was as an emnetwiht, awakened after he swallowed the piece of Chanteur.

For as long as humanity's history—whether that was centuries or millennia, he didn't know—they should have lived together as neighbors. And yet, they barely knew each other. They were barely even *aware* of each other, knowingly or not.

"Hey."

He called to it, but it didn't move.

"Nice to meetcha... No, that's weird. You've been with me this whole time."

No response. The Beast just stood in place, staring at nothing.

"Sorry for ignoring you for so long. Even though I'm kind of a victim here, too."

Still no response. Instead—

"—Yo."

—he heard a familiar voice and turned around.

Illuminated by the vanishing crimson rays, there was the face of a man of an indiscernible age, one that came with so many memories.

"Damn teacher."

"Looks like you've been through a lot. Any regrets?"

"Too many to count."

"Good, I'm glad." Nils plopped himself down beside Willem and smiled. "It's proof you lived life to the fullest."

Willem didn't think it was something to smile about.

"I finally understand. They just wanted to go home," he said, turning his gaze toward the crystal chunk beside him.

"Hmm?"

"They just wanted to take back the gray sea."

"It was the Visitors who took it away. And the reason *they* did that was because they wanted a home for themselves. And once that homesickness clashed, the surface was razed, and the people who lost *their* homes were chased off into Regule Aire."

"Everyone just wanted to go home. They just wanted to take back what was theirs."

The glimmer of the sunlight made Nils's shadow flicker.

"There doesn't need to be evil for the world to be destroyed. The beginning just happened to start with a small wish for which no one was to blame. And something like that led straight to the end."

"You're right. This world's already finished." Nils scratched his head. "By the way, I'm gonna have to get goin' soon. I can only use my powers as a Visitor up to six times in any one world, and I used up my last one sealing you. I needa start traveling again to find the next world."

"...You were a Visitor, huh?"

It should've been a shocking revelation. But Willem wasn't particularly surprised.

That was either because his heart was so worn down or because he'd long since given up on being surprised about whatever the man happened to really be.

"You comin'?"

"Huh?"

"This world's in its last days. You're dead—there's nothin' you can do. So would you wanna come with me to a new world? Play our cards right, and

you could probably live a bit of an easier life. It'll be more substantial than staying dead here for all of eternity, at least."

"Huh..." Willem pondered. "You basically want me to be a Visitor?"

Nils nodded bitterly.

"Sounds fun."

"I think you'd fare well wherever you ended up."

"Probably."

Losing his home had been hard. Painful. But he managed to recover. He found a new place he could call home. The memory and experience of it all were irreplaceable treasures to him.

"In the end, I couldn't do anything for you or for this world. This's the last thing I can do for you as your damn teacher."

"What'll happen to this, then?"

He indicated the crystal chunk beside him with his gaze.

"Right now, you're both just barely in a separated state. We'd leave the Beast here, and I'd take you alone."

"Ahhh... I get it." Willem scratched his head. "Sorry, but I can't leave."

"I see." Nils nodded. "It's rough and miserable to lose your home, to not have a place to go home to anymore. But y'know what? You can still find a new place. Anyone can."

All those stalwart people who called Regule Aire home were originally people of the surface.

How much blood had they spilled before they accepted their new home?

"But it's not gonna go well if you try and rush it. It takes time."

"It takes time to stand up from the pain of loss. It takes time to meet people. It takes time to find peace in a new place. And that's where everyone failed. That was true for the Visitors and for these Beasts. Everyone got the steps wrong, because they tried to take their homes back in a single stride."

"Well, I guess I never really realized it, either. But if you raise your head up and take a good look around, you'll find people to teach you things right by your side."

Willem closed his eyes.

Who were the people who were by his side for him? There was Glick, there was Nygglotho, there was Nephren...there was Chtholly.

They had taught him so many things that it was almost a waste. He'd been left out to dry even after his own world had ended, but they saved him.

"I want to stay by this thing," he said.

"You wanna chat with it, you mean? You can't. Its metal makeup and mode of life are too different."

"Yeah, I know. I'm not that idealistic."

He wrapped his arm around the crystal chunk's shoulder (?) like they were buddies.

"These things never saw anything but their home world. They could only ever see visions of things they'd lost. That's why they never accepted

Regule Aire and why they're trying so hard to put us down. Doesn't that make you feel terrible? That's why I wanna do something for it. Past aside, I've got this weird thing next to me right now. That's what I want 'em to think."

"You an idiot?"

"I've recently started to think I am."

They smiled at each other for one last time.

"You sure are a busy guy. You're extra fussy about a world that's already done for, even after death."

"I could never become someone. So I guess this is all I can really do, y'know?"

"...Mm..." As Nils started to say something, the edges of his profile began to blur. "Why not, then? Sounds like you."

"I recently started to think that, too."

They ran out of words to say.

They stood side by side, staring blankly out at the sunset.

By the time he noticed and turned to look beside him, Nils was gone.

Willem was alone with this crystal chunk—a fragment of a Beast's obsession in this ending world.

"...So anyway, guess we'll be in this together for a long while yet, huh?"

He rolled over onto his back. There was enough space on this platform for him to do that.

There was nothing in the sky above him. Not even a single star.

"Oh yeah, it's gonna be hard to talk to you if you don't have a name. Want me to give you a good one?" he asked lightheartedly and closed his eyes.

—A short time passed.

“Heeeey! Eudea, waaait!”

“Nuh-uh!”

Two girls dashed down the hall of a ramshackle shelter. The floor looked like it might give out at any moment, but they were both used to it and deftly dodged all the risky spots as they ran.

“I thought I told you tonight’s dinner is to celebrate the big girls coming home, so no snacking!”

“But it smells soooo good, doesn’t it?! Almita’s food is so tasty, I bet the big kids’ll be really happy with it. And of course, I’m gonna be really happy with it, too!”

“Uggghhh, you’re so annoying! I’m gonna give you a spanking!”

“Nooooo!”

Their loud steps rattled the house.

“You two are so loooud! Pipe dooown!”

“Are they at it again?”

“Hey, hey, let’s make a bet. Who do you think’s gonna win today?”

“Ooh, I’m in. I bet my dessert tonight on Eudea getting away.”

"Then, I'll go for the opposite... You in, Tazeka?"

"Huh? Uhhh... Then, I'll go with Kana. I bet my dessert tonight, too."

"Wait, why? We're betting to see whether Eudea or Almita's gonna win, you know."

"Yeah, I think that's obvious."

The girls peeked out from windows here and there, noisily cheering on the two and their chase scene.

"—They sure are lively again today, huh?"

The secluded material room.

A woman with golden hair sat in a wheelchair, chuckling delightfully.

"I don't want them to run around too much, since they'll send the dust flying. And I just did a deep cleaning, too. I'll have to do it all over again."

The woman with hair the color of cherry blossoms flashed a troubled smile as she flipped through a batch of documents.

"That's the fate of a run-down warehouse, I s'pose. I think it's about time we just have the whole thing rebuilt."

"You may be right."

The pink-haired woman, Nygglotho, touched a finger to her cheek and tilted her head.

It was often said that a troll's true age rarely showed on their skin. Nygglotho was living proof, seeing as how her physical appearance had barely changed since ages ago.

"There are memories embedded everywhere. Every time I think about calling in a worker, I hesitate. See, you know the scratches on the wall of the dining hall? That's from when Nopht and Rhantolk were comparing their heights."

"Yeaaah, they were so close, no one could tell who was taller." Her eyes narrowed in nostalgia. "Oh yeah, you think those two're gonna make it back this year?"

"Mm. Unfortunately, it doesn't look like they will. I hear they're both working rather far away."

"Awww. I s'pose they gotta do what they gotta do."

A lot of things had happened.

For example, part of the rules that limited the freedom of the faeries had been conditionally relaxed. As a result, some of the mature faeries were living outside the warehouse.

Though unofficially, Rhantolk had been dispatched to liaise with the Orlandry Merchants Alliance and now single-handedly took care of finances and negotiations related to the faerie warehouse and the dug weapons. And Nopht was something like a part-time soldier for The Winged Guard, acting as a bodyguard for salvagers who went down to the surface.

Both of them were now working very hard in places far from Island No. 68. It wouldn't be that easy to call them back.

"...Oh right. Have Collon and the others come back yet?"

"Huh? No, not yet. They should be back in the evening."

"Oh. Then, I guess that was something else. I thought I saw an airship that didn't really look like a civilian one land at the aire-port a little earlier."

"Earlier? That's odd—I haven't received any word." Nygglotho cocked her head, confused.

Then there was a shy knock on the door to the material room, and a girl poked her head in.

"Excuse me, Miss Nygglotho and Miss Ithea. Have you seen Ryehl?"

The two women looked at each other.

"I haven't. Is something the matter?" Nygglotho asked.

"I haven't seen her anywhere," the girl replied. "I'm just worried 'cause if she went off to play in the forest again, then that's dangerous."

The faerie warehouse was surrounded by a rather dense forest. Water would sometimes pool in spots that were hard to see. It was quite a hazardous place for children and those who weren't used to the area.

"Oh no! We have to look for her!"

Nygglotho cast aside the documents in her hand and stood.

"I don't think we need to worry that much. Aren'tcha being a little overprotective?"

"Legal guardians have an exclusive right to be overprotective!" she shouted before sprinting out of the material room.

"Um... What should I do?" the girl left behind asked nervously.

"I don't think y'need to worry." Ithea shrugged.

"Kanaaaa! What are you doing?!"

"Hee-hee-hee. The fruits of your quarrel have been mighty delicious."

"W-wait a second! Stop there and let me spank you!"

"Uhhh... Guess that means Tazeka won our bet."

"Hmm. I still wouldn't call it a bet exactly, but I'm surprised she actually won."

"Waaaaait!"

"...They're a real peppy bunch all right," Ithea, now left alone in the material room, murmured to herself, a lonely smile crossing her face.

Still in her wheelchair, she placed her hand against the windowpane.

A long time ago, the man and the girls once stood on the other side.

That young man and those girls had done so much, so dazzlingly and brilliantly, all during that brief period at the end.

"A lot's happened, but I'd say we're doing pretty well here."

They were no longer around.

So Ithea faced the somehow blue expanse above and cast her report skyward.

"How 'bout you? Where are you now—what're you doing?"

The sky was distant and endless.

It swallowed up her words and gave no answer.

A girl was falling from the sky.

She seemed just under the age of ten. Apparently, she'd lost her footing on a tree branch, and she was now tumbling down headfirst. At the rate she was going, her drop would end with a crash onto the ground, an outcome ill-befitting such a beautiful spring afternoon.

"Whoa—"

The young man reached out to catch her. But just a moment before he could, he slipped, and he practically sailed through the air before slamming into the ground. As a result—

"Gah!!"

—he broke her fall and was pinned beneath her, left croaking like a squished frog.

"...Owww..."

A few seconds later, the girl seemed to finally realize what had happened, and she hurriedly jumped off.

"I-I'm sorry!! A-are you hurt?! Are you alive?! Are your insides still intact?!"

"Uhhh, I'm fine. I'm a lot sturdier than I look." He stood, brushing the dirt off his clothes. "But you're all dirty, aren't ya? Are you all ri—?"

He looked at her.

Her hair was a cerulean blue, like the sky on a bright, sunny day. Her eyes were a deep indigo, like looking down onto a calm sea.

He felt like he'd seen it all somewhere before.

"—Hmm?"

Their eyes met, and the two of them froze.

"Have we met somewhere before?"

"Uh, n-no? I don't think so... Probably..." The girl tilted her head. "I've never left this island. You're not from around here, are you?"

"Uhhh, well, guess it's been a while." He gave a vague answer.



"If you're walking on this path, does that mean you have something to do at the warehouse?" the girl asked.

"Yeah."

"Then, you're our guest. Follow me—I'll show you the way."

The girl whirled around on her heel and started walking off with an unnatural gait.

The young man stared ahead blankly at her.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nah... It's nothing."

He scratched his head and started following. Then—

"Ryeeeeeh!"

—he heard a woman's voice calling out for someone from the direction they were headed. It was getting closer.

"Ryeh!... Ohhh, geez! There you are!"

A tall woman jogged toward them.

"Don't make me worry like that again. How many times have I told you not to run off into the forest alone—?"

"Um, I'm sorry, but, um, I saw a funny animal and, um, then it ran away, so I chased it up a tree, and, um—"

The little girl's defense—whether she was excusing herself or bragging, it was hard to tell—cut off mid-sentence. She realized the older woman wasn't looking at her.

"No...way..."

The woman pressed both her hands against her mouth, speaking in a quiet, shivering voice.

"This can't... Wait, but..."

"Sorry. I've been away for a pretty long time."

What? Huh? What?

The little girl's gaze bounced back and forth between the man and the woman, not quite understanding what was happening. But neither of them explained anything as they simply exchanged looks, almost as though it was something only they could understand.

"I'm back," said the man.

The woman's eyes widened, bewildered, brimming with tears. Her expression was a messy mix of a smile and a sob.

And with a shaky voice that kept catching, she responded in kind:

"Welcome...home...!"

Afterword

The Thing You Write at the End

If I had a time machine, I would go see myself from twelve years ago.

Back then, I used to spend late nights almost every day at the bar of a diner in pursuit of my masterpiece cocktail. Once I'd concocted something that satisfied my tastes, I'd go back to my seat, gently open my laptop, and play *Minesweeper* with a serious expression. When I got bored of that, I'd play hearts or solitaire. And by the time I'd realize it, it was almost morning. That was my typical life as an author back then.

I'd go there to young Akira Kareno and tell him this:

Hey, I'm you from twelve years in the future, and I've come to give you a little advice.

Do *not* throw away the plans for that fantasy world you just buried deep in your HDD. You'll go through so many high highs and low lows, and there'll be times you'll find yourself almost breaking under the pressure—actually, there *will* be times where you'll fall to pieces, but there is a future where you'll actually reach the very end of the marathon. And that “very hungry heroine who could even eat people” you wrote in your proposal *will* appear in the final product, albeit with a few adjustments.

And then, past me would say this: You say you're from the future, but I'm not gonna believe you right off the bat. If you want to convince me, tell me what movie's popular in your time. Then I would think for a bit. I've been pretty busy, so I haven't been able to see too many movies, but I can name a few distinctive titles. Then, with confidence, I would say: *Star Wars*.

...Oh, no. That's not going to work.

Then he would yell, “What time period do you think that movie's from?!” and the conversation would just veer off topic.

Let's put past me aside.

Hello, it's me, present Kareno. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting.

I present to you the final volume of WorldEnd: What Do You Do at the End of the World? Are You Busy? Will You Save Us?

Yes, that's right—this is the final volume.

The story of the character named Willem Kmetsch has reached an ending, and I have managed to tell it to completion.

Truly quite a lot has happened, but I managed to get this far with the support of so many people. I offer my gratitude to all of you who have followed the story this far. Thank you so much.

And I know this is sudden, but I have an announcement to make.
To put it bluntly, I am starting a new series.

One story has ended, but the curtain lifts on another tale. Those who live in the dying world still have days ahead of them. They all wish for their own selfish ends, and those fleeting days unfurl in an ungainly way...

The story takes place on the same island cluster as *WorldEnd*. But some time has passed, so the little children have now grown up.

If the many factors involved end up going well, it should be available in bookstores at the same time as this book. I haven't decided on a title yet, but I'm feeling that it might end up something like *What Do You Do at the End of the World? May We Meet Again Just One More Time?* ...This one might be a little shorter, but it still sure is long!

In any case, I would be thrilled to have you accompany me in the story of this twilight world for a little while longer.

Winter 2016
AKIRA KARENO

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